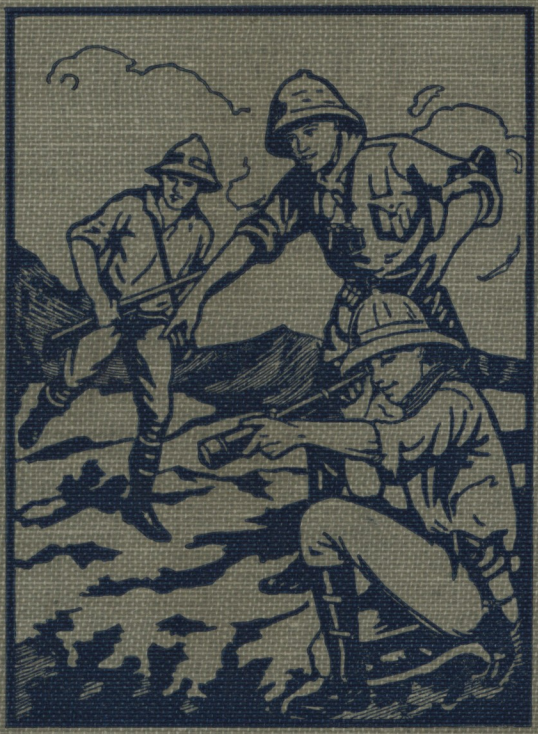
The ADVENTURE BOYS and the RIVER of EMERALDS



by
AMES
THOMPSON

The ADVENTURE BOYS and the RIVER of EMERALDS

THOMPSON

CUPPLES & LEON CO.

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"DOWN, YOU!" THE HIDEOUS DWARF HAD COME FORWARD.

THE ADVENTURE BOYS AND THE RIVER OF EMERALDS

By

AMES THOMPSON

ILLUSTRATED

NEW YORK
CUPPLES & LEON COMPANY

THE JEWEL SERIES

By AMES THOMPSON

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THE ADVENTURE BOYS
And the Valley of Diamonds

THE ADVENTURE BOYS
And the River of Emeralds

THE ADVENTURE BOYS
And the Lagoon of Pearls

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THE ADVENTURE BOYS AND THE RIVER OF EMERALDS

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THE ADVENTURE BOYS AND THE RIVER OF EMERALDS

CHAPTER I

ON THE ADVENTURE TRAIL AGAIN

"SO this is Olly—Olly——" Bret Hartson came to a laughing stop, his merry blue eyes traveling brightly from one point to another of his new and strange surroundings.

Bret and four companion travelers, in corduroys, sombreros, and high-laced leather boots bore the unmistakable stamp of the world-wide adventurer as the five men paused in the middle of the primitive plaza of the ancient Peruvian town which nestled in the valley of the Urubamba River and was girt around by 'owering Andean steeps.

"Only you can't say it the way I can—'Ollantaytambo.'" Ralph Edwards tantalizingly reeled off the long name two or three times in mischievous succession for Bret's benefit.

"Sorry I can't run it off like that." Bret's tone was anything but sorrowful. His ready grin was even less so.

"Don't be afraid to try. I won't laugh at you. Go ahead," Ralph encouraged. "Even if the other fellows give you the ha-ha," he added slyly.

"They won't," Bret predicted with grinning confidence. "You'd better not, either. I'm going to call the burg 'Olly-for-short' and let it go at that."

"Come on, gang. Don't tell me you all stopped traveling to the burg to listen to Hartson." Ralph took a beckoning step onward, feigning deep surprise.

"Now he's started on the rest of us," murmured Stanley Green. "The climate seems to have affected him."

"*I* stopped because it's a relief to take a look about with both eyes, instead of always having to keep one eye on the trail and the other on you fellows," Malcolm Edwards declared tranquilly.

"The josh bag blew up when it got to Oom Boss Edwards," Jimmy Stone said with a chuckle. "He handed you a straight whanger, Bossy Ralph."

"I heard it. Oh, Gee! 'Bossy Ralph!' That reminds me of Dado. Wish he was with us." Ralph forgot his love of teasing in a rush of regretful, friendly memories of Dado, the young African who had previously accompanied Malcolm Edwards, his son Ralph, Jimmy Stone, Stanley Green and Bret Hartson on a diamond-

hunting expedition across the South African veldt.

Readers of "The Adventure Boys and the Valley of Diamonds," need no introduction to the little band of adventurers, who, headed by Malcolm Edwards went through wild and perilous adventures on the South African veldt and among the war-like Zunans of Zuni's Village, an untamed spot in the very heart of the cruel, mysterious veldt.

It was near Zuni's Village, the headquarters of a savage tribe of Africans, living in the depth of an almost impassable jungle, that the Adventure Boys actually found the secret valley of diamonds of which Mr. Edwards had heard from Tom Ferris, a veteran diamond hunter.

A disastrous encounter with a black-maned lion had made a cripple of Tom Ferris, though there was hope of his ultimate recovery. He and Malcolm Edwards had entered into a partnership, and it was thus that Edwards had come into the secret knowledge of the existence of a Valley of Diamonds.

Accompanied by his seventeen-year-old son, Ralph, two wide-awake New York City boys, Bret Hartson and Jimmy Stone, a sailor, Stanley Green, who had set foot in almost every country of the world, and Ferris' African companion and friend, Dado Mollo, the sextette of men had braved the dangers of the death-dealing veldt and had finally been rewarded for

their determined search for diamonds with a wealth of the white-sparkling stones, far beyond their expectations.

Before even a small part of the rich valley had been stripped of its sparklers, Malcolm Edwards had guided his little force of satisfied adventurers back to Natal where Tom Ferris lived. They had found Ferris' weak back greatly improved and his physician had predicted that he would be able to walk again before long.

What Tom Ferris wished more than all else to do was to take the veldt trail again himself to the Valley of Diamonds. Malcolm Edwards shared his desire in this respect. He, therefore, placed the date of the next expedition to Zuni's village a year away. In the meantime he had decided, since his diamond findings of the Valley had made him rich, to indulge himself in a pet project which he had long held in mind.

He had heard from friendly explorers, engaged in digging among the ruins of buried Peruvian cities, much that related to the true claim of Peru as a profitable emerald hunting ground. Some of them had expressed their doubt in the matter. Others had declared their belief that a vast treasure of emeralds lay locked in the heart of the Andes Mountains.

Malcolm Edwards had hunted diamonds in Brazil and also in the Guianas. Emeralds,

however, were his favorites among jewels. Owing to the uncertainty of the emerald prospect in the Peruvian Andes he had, heretofore, not been financially able to risk an expedition to Peru. To him, the prospect had ever been alluring. From the men who had made expeditions into the interior of southern Peru, uncovered long-buried cities and delved deeply into the habits and customs of the vanished Incas he had heard strange and remarkable stories. He was influenced least of all now by the knowledge that fine emeralds were worth more in the jewel market than diamonds. Nevertheless he cherished the true hope of the jewel man—to find stones wherever he might elect to prospect.

With the promise to return to Natal and Tom Ferris in exactly one year, Malcolm Edwards and his son, Ralph, Jimmy Stone, Bret Hartson and Stanley Green had sailed from Cape Town, South Africa, bound for a Pacific seaport of Peru. With the ancient city of Cuzco as their objective, they had there purchased the mules, horses and supplies necessary to the expedition up into the mountains north of Cuzco.

The little band of adventurers had then taken the northern trail to their first stop, Ollantaytambo, a quaint old Indian town situated in the valley of the Urubamba River. Here Edwards had planned that they should remain for a day

or two while he cached a goodly quantity of the outfit's food supplies in order to be on the safe side should the adventurers eventually return to Ollantaytambo with little or no food. They had decided to take with them on the trip ten of the narrow-backed Andean mules, two of which were to carry their blankets, ponchos, mosquito nettings and a tent, the canvas floor of which was sewed to the sides, making it both insect and snake proof.

It had taken the party two days of slow horseback travel behind the mules to go from Cuzco to Ollantaytambo. They had been lucky enough to secure a driver for the mules in Cuzco, but only as far as the valley town to which they had now come. The Indian, a solemn-faced, dark-brown native, had absolutely refused to listen to Mr. Edwards' proposal that he accompany the expedition through the mountains at double the pay as mule-tender.

Need of a good mule-tender had sent the five adventurers out of the ancient inn where they had been staying on a hunt for one. They had decided to remain over night at the inn since its courtyard would shelter their mules and ponies. They had arrived in the town at noon that day and had eaten a palatable dinner at the primitive hostelry of stewed mutton, boiled potatoes, green corn and freshly-baked brown bread. Dinner eaten, they had strolled out of the inn and about the straggling dirt streets

with a view toward familiarizing themselves with their surroundings, as well as trying to secure a driver.

Among them, Stanley Green was the only one who could speak the Quichua tongue, the language of the Incas, and common to the Indians of the highlands of southern Peru. Mr. Edwards and Ralph were familiar with Spanish, while Bret's and Jimmy's knowledge of languages other than English was limited to a little Spanish and a few Boer and Zulu words which they had learned during their initial journey over the veldt in South Africa.

"It's a long long way to Africa and Tom Ferris," sighed Jimmy Stone. "This Olly-what-you-may-call-it is a sure-enough hot burg." He whipped off his broad-brimmed felt sombrero, and began fanning himself vigorously with it.

"Right-o; and this confounded plaza is a grand little sun catcher," supplemented Bret Hartson in a grumbling tone.

"It has nothing on the veldt on a rip-snorting hot day," Stanley Green reminded the good-humored pair of grumblers.

"What's the matter with you fellows? "Don't you like our little city?" asked Ralph with his usual mischievous intonation.

"Show me the city," Bret demanded with derision.

"This mountain lay-out is too much of a

muchness for me," Jimmy Stone confessed ruefully. "It's a regular old breath-catcher. I feel all stuffed up with wonders."

"It surely is a breath-snatching proposition," Ralph admitted with a sudden swift change toward the serious. "A fellow could hardly believe that there were such wonders unless he saw them with his own eyes."

On the highway from Cuzco to Ollantaytambo the adventurers had looked upon the amazing marvels wrought on the mountain sides by the vanished Incas, and undoubtedly of a people before the Inca period in Peru, with profound admiration and astonishment. The staircase farms, terraces, hanging gardens, masterly-wrought aqueducts, roadways, fortresses and curiously-built store houses, which the industrious and indefatigable Incas had built, had impressed the Adventure Boys to the point of completely running out of wondering exclamations. Ollantaytambo was set in the very midst of this amazing scenic spectacle.

"I'll take the veldt, for mine. I'm no steeple jack." Bret sent an upward disapproving glance at the towering steeps of the Andes Mountains, rearing their snow-capped heads for a mile above the Urubamba Valley on three sides, in which lay the little town of Ollantaytambo. "Let a fellow climb up one of those dizzy boys, then make a misstep. Bz-z-zt. One swift downward shoot—— *Good-night!*"

"Cheer up. You'll change your mind after the first try at mountain climbing," Stanley Green assured lightly.

"It'll have to be some change from the way it is now," Bret replied with a touch of smiling stubbornness. He was still at the stage of feeling hopelessly insignificant beside the vast natural panorama, rising high about him.

"Have a heart," Green continued his light encouragement. "I'll say man certainly won out over Nature in this region. These Incas, and the fellows who lived here before them, were an industrious set. They must have had exceptional constructive genius. Think of that aqueduct we saw yesterday! And what's left of those terraces and staircase farms! The Incas tamed old Nature in one of her worst moods. So you needn't feel as though you were only about two inches tall." The sailor had divined Bret's half abashed mood.

"You said it." Bret's usually merry features broke into the bright flashing smile for which he was always welcomed wherever he might go. "I hadn't thought of it in that way."

"Just forget everything else but that we're hoping we strike a dandy emerald patch," was Ralph's blithe advice. "Come on, gang. I'm tired of the official town lot. Let's take a hike over to the nearest of some of these old ruins. I want to take a close-up squint at 'em."

"Duty first, and pleasure afterward," re-

minded his father. "Don't forget we are out to find a mule tender. The longer we are without one, the longer we shall have to delay here."

"Couldn't we take turns tending the mules?" Jimmy asked hopefully. "We managed the two burros we had on the veldt trip in good style."

"We only thought we did," was Ralph's laughing correction. Dado was the real mule tender on that expedition. He was a star. He could do half a dozen different things at once without balling up any one of 'em. Besides, we don't want to bother tending the mules when there are emerald pits to be stripped."

"These natives understand both their mules and their mountains instinctively, Jimmy. Since it's not a question of expense, I am going to look about here for a good man. I'd be willing to give the right sort of man plenty of opportunity to hunt emeralds with us," Mr. Edwards ended in his generous fashion.

"Since Oom Boss Edwards say it's duty first, let's tackle that choice assortment of Peruvians over there." Ralph had started for the east side of the plaza with his own suggestion called back over one shoulder.

Three sides of the ancient plaza were devoted to open market sheds where a miscellany of small hardware, goods of native manufacture and quantities of fruit and vegetables were

offered for sale. The east side of the plaza was given over to a horse and mule market as well as a hitching stand for the mules and ponies of the mountain folks who occasionally left their lofty perches to ride down the mountain side and into the valley town.

In the center of the primitive-looking square was a curious old stone fountain, from which no water rose. Scattered about here and there on the patches of sun-dried grass were the odd "medicine" merchants, their wares spread out around them in odd little striped woven bags. These merchants, mostly women, were the only druggists the town boasted. Some of their remedies were highly useful herbs. Others were merely starfish and queerly colored stones to be used as charms against evil or disease.

Ralph had headed for the mule side of the plaza. He brought up at the edge of a little crowd of natives who were evidently engaged in a friendly chat. Since he could not speak the Quichua tongue, he said bouyantly in Spanish: *"Buenos dias, señores."*

CHAPTER II

THE LOST CAVERN OF EMERALDS

"*BUENOS dias* (good day)." One of the brown men in the bright-eyed group of natives responded to Ralph's salutation. He was extremely tall, light brown in color and with straight black hair and large black eyes. He was barefooted, wore a pair of yellowish cotton trousers, cut off at the knees, and a hip length tunic of striped material. Over his shoulders, and trailing down his back, he wore a gay-colored Indian blanket.

His companions, dressed more or less similarly, but darker than he in color, said nothing. Two or three of them smiled a little, eyeing the adventurers with a not unfriendly scrutiny.

The Peruvian natives, when fairly treated, are peaceably inclined toward strangers. Aroused to anger, they often become sullen and vengeful. They have the inherited Inca tendency toward minding their own affairs, and treat travelers to Peru with an indifference which the visitor to the land of the Incas finds very exasperating. The group of Indians which Ralph had tackled showed no signs of

being specially interested in the quintette of "Americanos."

"*Hablo usted Espanol* (do you speak Spanish)?" Ralph now addressed the tall light brown fellow.

"*Un pocito* (a little)." The other shrugged his blanketed shoulders.

"We are looking for a good man to tend our mules." Ralph plunged into the outfit's need of a mule driver with his usual impetuosity. "My father will pay well for a driver for our ten mules. How would it suit you to drive for us? We are going across the mountains over there." He nodded toward the northwest.

"No, no." The brown man shook a decided head.

"*No me comprende usted* (Do you not understand me)?" Ralph questioned the fellow.

"*Si, comprendo* (Yes, I understand). *No hablo* Ingles. Hablo Espanol. Hablo Quichua (I do not speak English. I speak Spanish. I speak Quichua)." The Indian spoke deliberately, his dark eyes appraising the group of adventurers.

"Then that 'Nay, nay,' means old chocolate cream can't see our little mountain expedition," Ralph turned and informed his companions in English. The others had come up with him in time to hear his exchange of remarks with the Indian. "Go ahead, Green. Shoot it to Brownie

in Quichua. Find out, if you can, why he can't see himself bossing our mules."

"Some of his friends got what you said, I think," muttered Bret in Ralph's ear. "None of them look crazy to take over our mules. They acted panicky; as though something had got their goat."

"Why do you not wish to go to the mountains with us and mind our mules?" Green asked the Indian the question in brisk Quichua.

"I do not wish to go," came the flatly obstinate answer.

"Yes, but why not? That's what I'm asking you," Green repeated impatiently.

"Nothing but bad luck is there," the brown man replied, lifting his arms in a gesture of futility.

"What bad luck did the mountains ever bring you?" the sailor quizzed with humorous incredulity.

"Once I drove mules for a man and his helpers who came to hunt for a lost Inca city. This is what happened to me. The water I drank gave me a fever. A viper bit me, and I almost died. My mule slipped and fell down a cliff, and a rock fell on me and broke my arm. Can you see any reason why I should again wish to go up on those mountains?"

"Um, no. Not after getting your neck stepped on like that," Green commented in English. Immediately he returned in Quichua.

"You might have better luck to go with us this time."

"No, señor. I would not go, not even if you were to give me the lost cavern of emeralds."

"The lost cavern of emeralds? What is that?" Green had pricked up mental ears. A glance at the tense brown faces of the other natives showed him that they understood their companion's allusion, even though he did not.

"It is nothing that we shall ever see," the Indian replied darkly. "But in the time of those who reigned before the Incas and who made all the wonder works that are still left on the mountains there was a cavern of emeralds. They say these men were gods who made the cities for play and hunted the emeralds for pleasure. And they had a great cavern underground where they used to go and dig emeralds as large as birds' eggs. Then they grew greedy and each god wanted the best emeralds for himself. So they killed for the sake of the accursed green stones. And that made the esmeraldas unlucky. They have been unlucky ever since then. There is nothing but bad fortune in the esmeralda." He paused, shaking his head warningly. His dark-featured companions bore him out in his opinion with sighs and sober nods.

"What's it all about?" Ralph asked impatiently. "What is chocolate bud looking so glum about? Any of his family in jail?"

"Don't make me laugh. This is a serious job." Green's eyes were dancing though his face was sober. "The whole gang is watching me. This fellow has been wising me about a lost cavern of emeralds over there in those mountains where you can find green shiners as large as birds' eggs."

"Oh, Gooseberries! That's exactly the kind of prospect we are keeping an eye out for. Ask him how much he wants to lead us to it. Tell him we'll give him a commission on every birds-egg emerald we dig out." Ralph's flippant rejoinder raised a laugh among his comrades.

"You Americanos only laugh," the Indian said to Green in Quichua, his heavy eyebrow contracted in a deep frown. "You think what I say about the esmeralda is not true. You are wrong. It is true. There is a blood curse upon all esmeraldas. You know how cruelly the Spanish killed once for these green stones. It is bad luck to hunt them, but," the brown man's tones took on an intensity of grim earnestness, "it is worse luck to hunt for the cavern of esmeraldas in the mountains. *That* is certain death."

CHAPTER III

A BLOW IN THE DARK

"LET'S be on our way. These fellows are stuffed to the gills with fairy tales and superstition. You couldn't persuade one of them to join our outfit for a thousand dollars," was Stanley Green's opinion after ten minutes' further conversation with the group of Indians. Each of them had added something he had heard about the lost cavern of emeralds to their companion's superstitious opinion.

"Wonder what chocolate bud would say if he knew we were out on the emerald trail ourselves," laughed Ralph as the adventurers finally nodded farewell to the knot of Peruvians and started across the plaza toward the main street of the town. "I'll take the cavern of esmeraldas for mine. Lead me to it."

"Do you suppose there was ever any such thing as a cavern of emeralds?" Jimmy Stone pondered aloud after listening avidly to the sailor's account of what the Indian had said. "Of course, all that stuff about the gods is bunk, but the Incas may have found emeralds in a cave."

"It is quite possible they may have washed for emeralds in a cavern with water flowing through it," commented Mr. Edwards. "Prescott mentions in his 'Conquest of Peru' the 'River of Emeralds.' It was situated not far from the city of Quito and so named because of the quarries on either bank of the river from which came emeralds of large size and fine quality. But emeralds are to be found in the gravel of streams the same as diamonds," the jewel man added.

"Oh, mamma! Don't I wish we were on the way to digging up a few green shiners now!" was Ralph's longing exclamation. "This digging up a muleteer is no joke. I can't see one stepping out from among that bunch of striped blankets and kneeless pants."

"We may have to tend the mules ourselves," Green said with a shrug of his broad shoulders. "Still, it won't do any hurt to stay on here for a few days and keep an eye out for a driver. Maybe the innkeeper can find one for us. He told me he'd been keeping the inn for twenty years."

"If we should land one of these shy Peruvian birds we'll have to keep quiet about the emerald end of our expedition until he is used to us. Break the news gently to him, you know. You can see just how popular these little mountain prospecting parties are around this region," Ralph remarked jokingly.

"Nope," disagreed Stanley Green with good-natured emphasis; "our Peruvian bird will have to take it straight from the shoulder in the beginning, even if he quits before he's hired. He'll have to learn what it's all about and agree to stick to the outfit. Otherwise, he might bolt on the trail and leave us in the lurch just when we needed him most."

"Why didn't you ask one or another of that crowd to go with us, after the big fellow turned you down?" Bret asked curiously. "I know you had a good reason for not doing it. I'd like to know what it was."

"There wasn't one of those fellows that would have stuck to us. Or, if he had, he would have probably been worthless in an emergency. The big fellow was different. He had initiative. He was boss of that crowd, too. He seemed straightforward, but I believe he's a fox," was Green's thoughtful appraisal of the Indian he had interviewed.

"I had a vague distrust of him, too," asserted Mr. Edwards. "Two or three times when he was telling us that yarn about the cavern of emeralds it struck me that he was a bluff. I can't understand more than a few words of Quichua, I went by his tones and his gestures. He seemed to want to scare his pals, and he was trying to scare us, too. He may have opened a rich emerald pit not very far up

the mountains and is afraid another prospector may find it."

"You read him about the same as I," nodded Green. "What he lacks, just as any other savage or half-civilized man lacks, is the gray matter to understand that it's hard to fool a white man."

"Betcha it is. The only dark-face who ever fooled me was Monako, and he fooled the bunch." Ralph smiled, recalling the innocent manner with which young Zuni, of the Zunans, had long pretended not to understand English while on the trail with the Adventure Boys during their recent diamond hunt in South Africa. A detailed account of this eventful trip has already been set down in "The Adventure Boys and the Valley of Diamonds."

The adventurers spent the rest of the afternoon in an interested inspection of the Inca ruins which fairly girdled the town of Ollantaytambo. Far across the valley below the town, broad Inca terraces stretched for over a mile. They strolled along an inclined, ancient road above the terraces for a considerable distance, returning to the inn shortly before dark.

Supper was precisely like dinner in the matter of viands, except for the addition of some very sweet preserves which the adventurers welcomed hungrily. After supper Malcolm Edwards and Ralph approached the innkeeper, a small, wizened face Spaniard with very bright

black eyes, on the subject of securing a muleteer.

"*Ay mi madre* (oh, my mother)!" the little man showed nervous excitement at the question. He waved his lean hands in fluttering disapproval. "No one wants to go to the mountains," he went on in vehement Spanish. "Where the men have dug out the very old city, that was built and destroyed before the time of the Incas, there are now plenty of deadly snakes; vipers and bushmasters, and sometimes pythons. And there are bandits, too. Besides, there is a curse upon those mountains yonder. They say the Spanish are to blame for that. They say my countrymen were cruel to the Incas, and stole their gold and emeralds. The Incas cursed the mountains then so that the Spanish should never have any good fortune while living on them. Many of the Indians, who are of the blood of the Incas, do not like me because I am Spanish. I do not care." The little man snapped his fingers. "No; you will not find a man for the mules."

"A point-blank shock; right off the bat; just like that," Ralph's pretended air of apprehension ended in his merry flashing smile. "He doesn't care how badly he hurts our feelings, does he, Dad."

"Evidently he does not." Malcolm Edwards returned rather grimly. To the innkeeper he said: "I will give you two libras for yourself

if you will find me a man you believe we might trust to tend our mules over the mountains."

The little man pursed up his thin lips and raised his eyebrows at the offer. "*Gracias, señor* (thank you, sir)," he responded. His change of tone denoted his increase of interest in the matter as a result of the two libras. Since a libra is the gold piece in Peru most nearly corresponding to the American five-dollar gold piece, the Americano's offer of two libras was worthy of consideration.

"Manaña I will see if I can find a man for you," he promised. Then, as though having just recalled something displeasing to him, he added with frowning doubt: "*Pero* (but) I do not believe I can find one."

The five jewel hunters had chosen to occupy together one large bare room of the one-story rambling old stone inn instead of scattering to separate rooms. Mr. Edwards had ordered the proprietor to place three cots in his room. He and Ralph having elected to sleep in an old Spanish bed, the room's one stick of furniture, and hard as a board.

The usual night watch which the jewel hunters never neglected to post when on the trail of precious stones, was divided between Jimmy and Stanley Green. Jimmy took his place in the walled-in courtyard of the inn at dark, there to remain on watch until two in the morning when Green would relieve him.

The adventurers had spent considerable time and thought upon the outfit they had selected for the mountain expedition. This fact counted for more with them than the actual value of the outfit in itself. They had also been happy in a selection of ponies and had already named and begun to train the wiry, sagacious animals. Even the mules had been the pick of a large lot. The jewel hunters were, therefore, determined to take no risks of losing any of their property from lack of watchful care.

When on the veldt it had been the rule of the camp that two men, rather than one, should stand a double nightly watch. The peaceful atmosphere which prevaded the old stone hostelry was responsible for the breaking for once of the rule of double watch. The room the comrades were occupying was in an ell, extending from the right hand side of the building and into the courtyard. With the windows open, those within the room could hardly fail to hear even a whispered word of alarm from Jimmy, should he need their help.

Jimmy was confident that he could "swing" his watch any time without help from the others. Self-reliance on the adventure trail was his and Bret's highest aspiration. They liked to talk and plan of what they would do in an emergency to the fun-loving delight of Ralph who was wont to "kid" them unmercifully about it.

Midnight found Jimmy in the midst of a silence so soothing and serene as to be irksome. Even the mules, relieved of their burdens and resting placidly, stood as motionless as wooden animals. Jimmy patrolled the narrow limits of the oblong courtyard then sat down cross-legged, with an impatient sigh, on the cobble-stone floor. He had dropped down directly under one of the windows of his comrades' room, his back braced against the stone wall of the inn.

The pale, sickly rays of a fast-decreasing moon lighted the courtyard faintly, leaving it shadowed in the corners. Far above him on three sides, rose the dark outlines of the mountains which girdled the ancient town. Staring up at their vastness, seen as blacker blots against the night sky, Jimmy was again seized by his former feelings of helpless aggression against such monstrosities.

His eyes finally turned from a none-too-pleased contemplation of the towering highlands, where the Adventure Boys had a trail yet to blaze, to consult the illuminated face of his wrist watch. The aluminum hands pointed to ten minutes past one. Jimmy yawned. He was beginning to feel a little drowsy. He sprang to his feet and made a hasty, energetic round of the yard, returning to his former post between the two windows of his comrades' room. He did not sit down again for fear of

growing sleepy. It would not be long now until Green came to relieve him.

"By Jiminy, but it's quiet around here," he murmured. In the deep, pervading hush of the night his own voice sounded loud to him though he had spoken hardly above a whisper. "Not a blamed thing stirring!"

As if to contradict his soft explanation the sudden weird hooting of an owl broke the hushed silence. It sounded to Jimmy as though it came from a group of small trees just beyond the courtyard wall. It stopped as abruptly as it had begun, repeating itself perhaps ten minutes later. Then it kept up continuously for a brief space, finally dying out with a last long mournful "too, hoo."

Immediately following it came another noise which sent Jimmy racing over to where the ponies and mules were tethered to a long hitching rail. From one of the ponies had risen a sharp little whinny that sounded like an objection.

In the middle of the rear wall of the courtyard were heavy wooden gates similar to the double doors of the outer court of a Spanish plantation house. Every time that night when patrolling the yard Jimmy had stopped long enough before the massive double gate to try it. Each time he had found it securely locked. The hitching rail was situated at the left of the gate, and extended parallel to it.

"Great guns!" Jimmy broke into an alarmed shout as he ran toward the ponies. From among them a dark form had sprung up. Another figure, that of a tall man, was just swinging over the wall. He landed lightly on the courtyard floor and darted to the gate. The double doors seemed fairly to spring open at the tall man's touch. He dashed through the open gates, unheeding Jimmy's stern challenge of "Halt; or I'll fire," and was immediately lost in the darkness beyond.

Jimmy had reached the gate now and overtaken the first man he had seen just as the latter was on the point of driving the two ponies through the open gate. One of them was Ralph's pony, Brownie. Brownie had decided to rebel. He stopped short, jerking his head back and forth and attempting to rise on his hind feet.

"Drop those bridles." Jimmy's revolver now covered the rustler who was engaged in savagely trying to jerk Brownie onward through the gate. The Adventure Boy had discovered that the fellow was masked and wearing a long black cape which wrapped him within a few inches of his bare feet.

Instead of obeying the command the rustler made a desperate plunge forward through the gate without relaxing his cruel hold on the bridles of the two ponies.

Crack, crack! Jimmy fired twice in quick

succession, aiming wide of the horse thief. At such close range he could have easily killed the fellow. What he wished to do was to capture him. In a twinkling he was through the gate and launching himself upon the rustler now.

"Got you," he clicked triumphantly. His muscle-trained arms closed forcefully about the rustler in a crushing grip. The fellow began a furious struggle to break away. Jimmy hung on with bull-dog grit. He heard running footsteps and a babel of excited voices. Then something crashed down upon his head with wicked force. He saw stars and queer dancing lights. After that—darkness. His arms fell limply away from his still struggling captive. He crumpled and dropped to the ground just beyond the gate.

CHAPTER IV

FRIENDS OR FOES

"WHAT'S stir-ring? Who are you? What's the matter—with—me?" Jimmy's energy gave out on the third question. He lay back on his cot and stared up at the circle of friendly faces gathered around his bed with an air of helpless bewilderment.

"Nothing's stirring now but you, and you'd better keep quiet," was Ralph's humorous advice. "When you don't recognize your pals at a close-up, something surely must be the matter with you. I'll say there is."

"Um-m-m." Jimmy had undertaken to sit up and fallen back with a mumble of pain, one hand feeling for the top of his head. Things began slipping away again. Then he suddenly pulled himself together and sat up on his cot regardless of the protests of his pals. "I know what's the matter with me now," he said with a faint smile. "One of those rustlers hit me a crack on the top of the head. There must have been a gang of them after the ponies."

"Take it from me, Boy, your cap saved you

a broken head," Stanley Green assured Jimmy. "You had a couple of hankeys folded and laid in between the cap lining and the crown. That helped even more. That killer hit you an awful crack on the cocoanut with the butt of your own rifle. Can you beat that?"

"Where did he come from?" Jimmy had now begun to take a more active interest in things. "I saw two fellows. One came over the wall like a streak. He ran to the gate and unlocked it. The other was hidden in the courtyard before his partner came over the fence. The first one opened the gate and went through before I could catch him. The other fellow was right behind his pal and right ahead of me with the ponies. Brownie balked. That pony is a peach. The wise little old horse scented trouble."

"Better believe Brownie's some pony," cried Ralph proudly. "I'm in luck to own him. We heard a horse whinny just before you started shooting. I'll say it was Brownie who gave the alarm."

"I believe it must have been." Jimmy nodded, then put a quick hand to his head, now capably bandaged with gauze. Merely to nod his head gave him intense pain, due to the bruises and one small abrasion which he had sustained. "My head feels about three times natural size," he declared ruefully.

"If you should ever get a swelled head you'll

know beforehand how it feels," joked Bret cheerfully. "Three 'rahs for those hankeys you cached in your cap." Bret's relief at his chum's speedy return to consciousness, and with no serious injury to his head, showed itself in his beaming face and glad air.

"Tell me what happened," urged Jimmy. "Don't worry about my keeping quiet. It simply isn't being done. When did you fellows get into the game? Did you see this third rustler?"

"Did you see him, Jimmy?" countered Mr. Edwards.

"No, Mr. Edwards, I only felt the crack he handed me. I was hot on the trail of the fellow who had grabbed the ponies. I'm still a goof. I haven't learned to look in all directions at once," Jimmy confessed with chagrin.

"Wise him, Green. You were awake before the rest of us," Ralph said. "The first thing I heard was Green talking in my ear; telling me to wake up."

"It was about ten minutes after one when I woke up. Since I was to go on duty so soon I put on my shoes and laced them up, then lay down again. I hadn't undressed on account of going on watch," Green told Jimmy. "The rest of the gang were asleep. I lay there with my eyes half shut, waiting for two o'clock to come. Then the owl began to hoot. After it had hooted a few times I decided it was not an

owl, but a man, who was doing the hooting."

"I thought it was an owl hooting. Those rustlers had me fooled. It wasn't five minutes after the too-hooing stopped until Brownie tuned up. I started on the run to see what was the matter with the ponies——You know the rest. Excuse me for interrupting you, Stan," Jimmy ended apologetically.

"Oh, cheese it," the sailor advised with a smile. "Between your story and mine we'll get to the bottom of what it's all about, *pronto* (soon). As soon as I'd made up my mind the owl call was a signal I got up and went over to one of the windows. I raised it and stood with my head outside, rubbering into the dark. All of a sudden I jerked in my head and turned around. I don't know what made me do it, for I hadn't heard a sound. I saw a figure slipping along close to the wall and toward the door. It came from the lower left-hand corner of the room. I picked it up with my flashlight just as it blew out the door. All I got was the back view of some one in a long black cape."

"That's the way the fellow who tried to run off the ponies was dressed!" Jimmy exclaimed. "He was in his bare feet, too."

"The cape man I saw wore shoes; either rubber-soled, or of very soft leather," Green continued. "He never made a sound. There was an old coach lamp hanging over the back door, and I could see him by the light of that.

He went down that little hall to the back door like the wind. He had a rifle in one hand. The back door was open."

"He stole that rifle from the corner where we stacked them," Bret asserted, "and happened to nab Jimmy's. You were just out of luck, old boy," he sympathized, patting his chum's shoulder.

"And to think I got whanged with my own rifle!" Jimmy exclaimed in a tone of deep disgust. "Go on, Green. Right where you just left off is where this robber ran out of the back door, to give his pal first aid. That's when the pal and I came to a clinch."

"I ran out of the inn's back door in time to hear the whack of that gun barrel on your head. I couldn't tell much about things in the dark, but I knew there was a scrap going on over by the gate, and tried to wade into it. I was too late," was Green's regretful assertion. "The robber who was trying to run off the ponies let go the cayuses' bridles. The two robbers simply faded. I flashed them as they beat it. They were both masked. I didn't follow them. I knew Jimmy was down, and he came first."

"So that's how it all happened. I'm glad I know." Jimmy sighed his relief. "I remember now. I caught hold of the robber who was after the ponies. I had him for fair. He couldn't break away. He was trying it hard

enough. Then——" He gingerly touched his bandaged head.

"We were afraid you were done for when we picked you up. Oh, gee!" Bret gave an exclamatory groan of relief. "We'd heard two shots, and——"

"I fired those shots. I aimed 'em wild. I'd challenged the pony snatcher and he had kept right on going with the ponies. I wanted him to know I meant business. Only I didn't care to wound him. I suppose the gun noise woke up everybody in the inn?" Jimmy ended with an inquiring touch of humor.

"We were the only ones staying here except the big Indian we braced yesterday on the plaza about the muleteer's job," Ralph laughingly informed Jimmy.

"The little Spanish prop blew up like a torpedo about the gun scrap," Bret cut in animatedly. "He sputtered Spanish to beat the band. Ralph said that he said we might have shot him in the dark by mistake instead of the rustlers."

"I asked him if the rustlers were friends of his, and if he was in the habit of spooking around in the guest's rooms at two o'clock in the morning," Ralph interpolated. "He was mad as hops. He mumbled something in Spanish about being an honest man, and that all Americanos were *impudente,* and away he went. That was two A.M. It's now three P.M.

And I haven't seen dear Tomas yet! That's his name—Tomas Vesano—and he knows a whole lot more about what was pulled off last night than he'll say."

"Do you believe he left the doors unlocked for those robbers?" Jimmy asked Ralph. "If he did, then this must be a robber's roost. He didn't seem crooked to me. I knew a good many Spanish fellows when I used to be on the docks, from working with them in the exporting business. They're mostly very straight fellows."

"Just the same this Tomas guy has a few beans that he won't spill. He tried to put the kibosh on our mountain trip, the same as that big Indian did. First he said he could never get us a mule driver. Then he brightened up at the two-libra prize and said he would try to find us one. He meant that. Then, all of a sudden, he got cold feet and backed down on even hunting for one for us."

Ralph's shrewd summing-up of the innkeeper's contradictory statements brought a confirmatory nod from Stanley Green.

"I'll say he knows who was out for the guns and ponies last night," the sailor said. "He may be afraid to do anything but keep shut-mouthed about what he knows. He's Spanish, you see, and he depends mostly upon these Indian mountaineers for business. He wouldn't take sides with us against these mountain

bandits for fear of being murdered for giving them the double cross."

"That sounds very plausible, Stanley." Malcolm Edwards had been listening to the various surmises of his flock in silence. "There is also a question in my mind regarding this Indian we talked to yesterday. He was the only other guest here besides ourselves last night. He was in his bare feet. He is very tall. Jimmy can't explain how the one bandit was able to hide among the ponies and he not see the fellow, pronto. Perhaps the bandit let himself out of the house and into the court. It would be easy enough to change an Indian blanket for a black cape and mask. Naturally, Jimmy would not have seen the fellow in the dark. Let him spread his cape, and he would blend with the darkness. Of course, this is only supposition. I have no right to condemn the Indian unheard, even in thought," he frankly amended his circumstantial suspicion of the Indian who had given them what Ralph called "the straight steer out of Peru."

"Those fellows last night were killers. If this Tomas is in with them, he's no better than they," Bret declared flatly. "Why don't we have it out with him?"

"No use trying." Stanley Green promptly vetoed the suggestion. "If he's on the square, except that he keeps mum about these bandits for his own safety, he'll blow up, if we start to

quiz him, and then—nothing doing. If he's thick with robbers he'll hardly go back on them —unless he wants to die."

"I see," Bret realized the value of Green's point of view. "Our best plan, then, will be to keep him guessing. I wonder——"

Came a loud decided rapping on the door of the adventurers' room. Bret was sitting on the foot of Jimmy's cot. Green, Mr. Edwards and Ralph had seated themselves in a row on the edge of the next cot to Jimmy's.

Ralph bobbed hastily up from his seat and went to the door. He was fond of playing door-tender, on account of the many threshold adventures he had had with eavesdroppers and spies. As he swung the door back with an energy which he knew to be vaguely disconcerting to whoever might be outside, his gray eyes darkened with half resentful surprise.

"*Buenos tardes* (good afternoon)." Ralph's salutation was briskly cool. He surveyed the two men before him with an intent scrutiny which had little of friendliness in it. One of the pair who had knocked for admission was Tomas Vesano. He stood looking past Ralph and into the room, his forehead knotted in a deep frown. The other man was smiling, in the calm superior way he had smiled at the adventurers on the plaza. The suspected robbers, it seemed, had come to call on the Adventure Boys.

CHAPTER V

A BROWN-MAN PUZZLE

"*BUENOS TARDES.*" The two unexpected callers spoke exactly together.

"We wish to see your father, the Señor Ed-u-wards," was Tomas' immediate request.

"Come in," Ralph returned in Spanish. He moved aside, allowing the visitors to step past him into the room. His father had risen from the cot at first sight of the two and now met them in the middle of the room.

"What can I do for you?" the jewel man asked tersely. "Will you sit on one of the cots, since we have no chairs?"

"No, Señor Ed-u-wards," the little proprietor raised a protesting hand. "It is good to have feet, and to use them. I am a busy man, and have not much time to come here. I came to please this man *mi amigo* (my friend) Paullo Topa." He indicated the Indian who had taken the smile off his face and was now calmly impassive. "He has said to me that you have asked him to tend your mules for you when you go up the mountain. At first he thought

he did not wish to go any more to the mountains since he has had so much bad luck. Now he has changed his mind. He is a very brave man, and——" Tomas paused with a curiously hesitating air. He glanced at Paullo Topa as though for further inspiration.

The tall brown man said nothing. His large dark eyes roved from Mr. Edwards' face to Jimmy's, then on to the faces of the other three men. His gaze rested longest on that of Stanley Green. "You are the one who speaks my tongue," he said to the sailor in Quichua. "Where did you learn to speak it so well?"

"I have been in Peru several times before now," Green answered. "Once on a voyage from San Francisco to Quito I knew a Peruvian sailor. He taught me to speak Quichua. I used to follow the sea for a living. So I have learned a few languages besides my own."

Ralph shot a glance of surprise at Green. The sailor was usually brief to the point of taciturnity with strangers.

"Were you ever before in this valley?" the brown man asked Green with an odd flash of interest which the others instantly noted.

"No; Cuzco is the nearest I've come to this part of Peru." Green's wary brain was already at work, trying to fathom the native's reason for having asked the question. There was an air of dignity and repose about Paullo Topa which piqued his interest. He had told

Topa a little about himself, purposely, to draw out the brown man.

"Tell him I am surprised to know that he has changed his mind about tending our mules," Mr. Edwards said to Green in an undertone. "What do you think? Shall I hire him, Stanley? You remember the talk we had yesterday about him."

"I believe we may as well give him a trial," the sailor answered after a minute's reflection. "I'm not afraid he'll put over any tricky work, with all of us keeping an eye on him."

Green repeated Malcolm Edwards' expression of critical surprise to Topa. The Indian received it with a frank show of white teeth. There was something engagingly honest about his smile.

"It is true I said I would not go to the mountains for anything; not even for the cavern of emeralds," he admitted. "This is not the way to be a brave man. Besides I must work. I have little money of my own. Ask the Americano chief how much he will pay me for tending the mules, and if I must furnish my own food?"

"Tell him I will give him three libras a week and furnish his food," was the jewel man's offer when Stanley had translated Topa's inquiry. "Tell him, too, that I will not interfere with him in his work, but that he must obey my orders. I want no sulking or insubordination on his part, once we have taken the trail."

"When do you want him to know, now, or later on, that we are going to prospect for emeralds instead of dig out buried burgs?" Green turned inquiringly to Malcolm Edwards.

"You said yesterday that it was best to let our mule man have a straight-from-the-shoulder shock," Ralph reminded.

"I know it. I haven't changed my opinion," the sailor returned. "It's up to your father, the Oom Boss, to say whether or not I'm to wise this fellow."

"Better tell him. Be casual about it, Stanley," Mr. Edwards advised. "Tell him we do not wish him with us unless he will promise to prove faithful to us. Explain to him that he will have the opportunity to prospect with us and is welcome to his own findings. I don't ask him to turn them over to me, the way the majority of the jewel hunters insist on claiming the gems their men find."

The brown man listened gravely to Green's translation into Quichua of the jewel hunter's generous proposal. For an instant a gleam of approbation lived in his eyes. It vanished immediately, giving place to an expression of frowning concern. Watching him narrowly, Green was impelled to return to his first impression of Paullo Topa. He decided that the Indian had some kind of double game to play. He was evidently displeased with Edwards' revelation.

Tomas Vesano, who evidently understood Quichua well enough to follow the conversation between Green and the Indian now broke the momentary silence which had fallen upon the group.

"*Santos cielos* (Heavens)!" he exclaimed with stress. "You had better let the esmeraldas alone. Let them stay in the earth, where they belong. It is bad enough that you should wish to dig among the ruins of the lost Inca city. But the esmeraldas are cursed because men killed one another for them. I am a Spaniard, yet I must always have the bad name in Peru because my countrymen were the murderers, greedy for gold and esmeraldas. *You* will surely not go to the mountains with these *hombres* (men) to seek esmeraldas?" He whirled upon his Indian companion in excitement.

"Say, what's worrying him?" Ralph exclaimed in a vexed tone. "First he comes on deck with a muleteer. Fine business. Next he advises our willing chocolate bud to shun us. See here, Vesano; is this a regular habit you have?" Ralph flung the question satirically at the perturbed Tomas.

"I know not what you mean!" the little Spaniard cried crossly. He caught Topa by a fold of his blanket and led him a little away from the group of adventurers. Then he began a vehe-

ment chattering to the brown man in a dialect with which even Green was unfamiliar.

A battery of curious eyes was fastened upon the innkeeper and Paullo Topa. Vesano's rush of excited words had no apparent effect upon the Indian. They were like little choppy waves beating against a stone breakwater. Two or three times he shook a deliberate head, accompanying the gesture with a short sentence or two. Finally Vesano stopped arguing with the calm-faced brown man. He gave his bony hands a last disgusted flap and scuttled from the room without a glance toward the other occupants.

The Indian advanced toward the half smiling group of men with admirable dignity. Ignoring Vesano's violent behavior, he said to Malcolm Edwards in Spanish: "*Gracias,* Señor Ed-uward-es. I accept your offer. I will be faithful, and I know my business. But I do not wish to seek the esmeraldas. I shall not think of them at all. Then perhaps I will not be unlucky. You shall see me do well with the mules. But what I told you yesterday is true. The gods of misfortune still watch over their esmeraldas and punish those who try to take them away from the mountains. I warn you of this again."

"We are not afraid. We do not believe in these gods of the mountains, or that bad luck will follow us if we go about on the mountains

in search of emeralds," was Mr. Edwards' quick reply.

Topa stared fixedly at the jewel man, the shade of an odd smile touching his well-shaped mouth. "You are like most Americanos I have met, afraid of nothing," he said with a slight shrug. "You are not the first Americanos to go to these mountains seeking the esmeraldas. Will you believe me? In the last year have come sixteen Americanos, at different times, to hunt the green stones that are worth so much money. Three Americanos have come back to this inn from their hunt. One had found nothing but a broken head. One had found twenty stones, and dropped the bag he had them in over a precipice where he could not ever find the bag again. One found fifty emeralds, so he claimed, and a masked bandit took them from him on the way down the mountain side. The other thirteen Americanos have never returned. They must be dead somewhere on the mountains. Well, I believe in the bad luck gods of the mountain. This time I shall make many spells against them. It will help keep them away from you. I will give you each a charm to wear, too. Promise me that you will wear it, my chief, and make the young Americanos wear it, too."

"A charm is not a charm to those who do not believe in charms," Mr. Edwards said, smiling.

"Were we to wear it, it would be only to please you."

"But you will wear it, my chief?" There was a touch of concern in the question.

"Quizas (perhaps). Let us see the charm first."

"*Si, pronto,*" Topa promised almost eagerly. "When do I begin work for you, my chief?"

"To-morrow at sun-up. I'm going to start as soon afterward as we can load. We shall go by the way of Macchu Picchu, then strike out from there a little to the northwest."

"I will load the mules for you. None can do this better than I," the Indian asserted with calm surety of his own skill.

"One of the boys will help you." Mr. Edwards was secretly amused at the Indian's air of superiority, considering the exceedingly humble capacity in which he had just hired out to the outfit. He was also wondering whether he might not be mistaken in his surmise that Topa was foxy. The brown man's direct manner of speaking had favorably impressed the jewel man.

"Pay no attention to Vesano because he has behaved like an angry turkey." Topa had suddenly addressed Green again in Quichua. "Most of the Americanos who went to seek the emeralds in the mountains yonder, came first to the inn. Since only three of these men returned from the mountains, Tomas believes,

as I believe, that evil hangs over them. He thinks no one should go there to hunt such an evil treasure."

"I see," the sailor replied, then added shrewdly. "But Tomas was not worrying because we were going to prospect for emeralds on the mountains. He was *irritado* (angry) because you were going with us. He brought you to us himself, when he thought we were going to explore for another buried city like Macchu Picchu. Why should he make so much fuss because we are going to prospect for jewels?"

The Indian eyed Green steadily, but made no answer. Again the odd flashing concern which had lately sprung into Topa's dark features showed itself. He knit his heavy black brows as though considering something known only to himself which he was undecided whether or not to reveal.

"What's the matter, Topa? Come across with it. Why has Tomas a chip on his shoulder about your going prospecting for greenies with us?" Green demanded in the straight fashion he had which immediately won the respect of strangers.

The flicker of a smile lighted Paullo Topa's brown face at Green's humorously direct speech. "I might tell you I do not know, but it would not be true," he responded gravely in Quichua. "Vesano does not wish me to go to

the mountains for emeralds. He has a reason for this. I ask you to pay no attention to him in this. I am my own master. I shall go where I please and work for whom I choose. You are sure, Señor Ed-uward-es, my chief, that you will not be persuaded to stay away from these mountains?" he added half hopefully, his melancholy black eyes straying to the jewel man.

"Certainly not," Malcolm Edwards returned emphatically. "How about you boys?" He threw a laughing glance toward the Adventure Boys.

A concerted disapproving yell arose from the quartet at the jesting question.

"If you knew how far we'd come on purpose to get a whack at those Inca greenies you'd never have asked us that," Jimmy told the Indian through Green.

"From where have you come?" Topa's curiosity got the better of his dignity. He regarded Jimmy, who was sitting up on his cot apparently as lively as ever in spite of his bandaged head, with speculatively inquiring eyes.

"South Africa," Jimmy came back rather proudly.

"That is further than I have ever sailed." The brown man's eyes had opened in wide surprise. "Your head," he continued in a kind of embarrassed haste; "is it much hurt? Saw you the one who struck you down? With what

struck this one?" All of which Green conveyed in English to Jimmy.

"Tell him I certainly didn't see the fellow who handed me that wallop, and with my own gun, too. Ask him if bandits are thick in this part of the world. Tell him I can pick my own gun wherever I may happen to run across it. I'll make things hum for the bird that has it, if I once get a line on it. Tell him the killer-thief will get hurt a whole lot worse than he hurt me," Jimmy prophesied vengefully.

"There are not many bandits in these mountains, but somewhere among them, and high up, live the Capas, who wear the black cloaks and are killers," translated Green. "It must have been three of the Capas who were here last night. They must have known of your horses and guns. These are not easy for the Capas to obtain, since there is a price on the head of every Capa. They say the Capas go sometimes to the great South American cities and live like kings, and none know they are robbers."

"Good-night!" exclaimed Bret as Green finished translating Topa's interesting bit of information. "I guess it's the Capas, instead of the confounded old Inca gods that we'd better look out for. Take it from me, this pair of birds know more about what was pulled off last night than they pretend to know."

"What does he say?" The Indian made a motion toward Jimmy. His attention had evi-

dently been challenged by Jimmy's skeptical tone.

"He says it is the Capas who are likely to make trouble for us in the mountains. He thinks the gods are a joke." Green discreetly refrained from repeating to Topa Jimmy's boldly suspicious theory, which implicated the Indian and the landlord in the attack of the previous night.

"The gods are not a joke." Topa glanced darkly at Jimmy. "They send the bad luck to those who go to the mountain to seek the emeralds. Besides, there is the Shadow god of the Pool of lost men. All who go near this pool are drawn into it and drowned. I advise you Americanos to keep far away from it."

"Attaboy! That's just the place I choose to go swimming in." Ralph laughingly waved a flouting hand at danger. "I'll hunt for the blamed old Shadow god and duck him. What does he look like, Topa? I don't want to duck the wrong god, you know," he finished in Spanish directly to the brown man.

Topa had caught the derision in Ralph's laughing tones. He had also understood the young man's question, and its teasing import.

"Who can say what the one who is never seen is like?" he said with an ominous shake of the head. Immediately he turned his eyes away from Ralph and spoke to Mr. Edwards in Spanish:

"My chief, I will be in the courtyard with the mules when comes the first morning light. *Adios.*" Without further words he turned and padded from the room in his bare feet leaving the adventurers to decide, if they could, whether his superstition was real or pretended.

CHAPTER VI

THE WINGED TALISMANS

IT was not yet light the next morning when the Edwards' outfit were up and stirring. The dawn of what promised to be a fair day appeared in a pale rose glow in the east to find the adventurers in the courtyard, busily preparing for the start up the mountain.

True to his word, Paullo Topa made his appearance in the yard with the first ray of morning light. Shown by Malcolm Edwards the array of packs to be distributed as evenly as possible among the ten mules, he attacked the labor with a, "*Si, señor,*" and a deftness of hand that proved him to be an experienced muleteer.

To the surprise of the outfit Tomas Vesano was also astir in the kitchen engaged in preparing an early breakfast for his departing guests. Why he had elected to show them this courtesy was a puzzle to them. They had already planned to mount and ride a little way on their journey in the early morning, then stop and cook a wayside breakfast.

While Vesano frizzled slices of cold mutton

in a large frying pan, stirred up tortillas (pancakes) and kept an eye on a pot of bubbling chocolate, he muttered to himself, now and then making the sign of the cross. Later he poked his head in at the gateway in the courtyard wall to chatter a summons to breakfast to Paullo Topa, in Quichua.

Entering the long bare room with its long table and straight, high-backed Spanish chairs, the gem hunters found the table set for them and with the appetizing breakfast Tomas had cooked also upon it. The little proprietor, however, refused to show himself in the dining-room.

"Can't help it if Tomas is strictly on his ear at us. He is a pretty good scout to dig up this feed," Ralph declared as he poured himself a second cup of chocolate.

"Betcha he is," seconded Bret. "These are the best pancakes I've eaten since we landed in South America. What's the matter with Chocolate Bud that he's not here to breakfast? He must have dropped out of the gang on the way in."

"Vesano sent the good word that breakfast was ready to Topa in Quichua. I heard him," commented Green. "I'll bet I know why he blew," he said with sudden inspiration.

"Well, wise us," Jimmy urged placidly.

"No. Wait a few minutes. I'll say he'll

be back before we have emptied the chocolate pot," the sailor predicted, smiling.

"Oh, yes. I know of what you are thinking, Stanley," said Mr. Edwards, as he passed his cup to Ralph to refill with chocolate.

"So do I," sang out Ralph, "I wonder——"

He broke off short as a tall figure appeared in the doorway. Topa had returned. The Indian was dressed in a pair of dark trousers reaching below the calf of his leg, a white cotton blouse and a pair of woven straw sandals which boasted extremely strong pliable soles. Over one shoulder, and depending from a woven grass strap, was slung a woven grass oblong bag, resembling a knapsack. Across one arm, folded, hung the bright-hued blanket he had been wearing.

"I have brought *los encantos* (the charms), my chief." Topa came forward, speaking in Spanish, and stood beside Malcolm Edwards' chair. "In the beginning of a time very long ago there were seven *de los encantos.* One of the seven," he paused briefly, "was lost forever. Six remained among the treasures of my father who was Manco Topa, the grandson of the Inca lord, Truxillo Topa. Before my father died, when I was only el nino, the Capas came to our *hacienda* and stole my father's gold and the few jewels he had. But they did not find *los encantos.* My father had them safely hidden in an old shoe. The Capas

thought not to look in this shoe. I can remember now, how they looked in their black masks and big capes!" The Indian made a longer pause.

"Just as I suspected," Malcolm Edwards commented. "This man is of the pure Inca strain. He speaks the Spanish of a don. How about his Quichua, Green?"

"He's not ignorant. I know that about him. I can't pass on his Quichua, I don't know it well enough, myself, for that."

The two adventurers had time for no further exchange of opinion. Topa had slipped his knapsack from his shoulder and was rummaging in it. He next drew from it a flat, dark-green leather case about twelve inches long and six inches wide. The case was not more than an inch and a half in depth. He returned the knapsack to his shoulder, holding the case in one hand.

The lid of the little green leather case sprang open at a touch of the Indian's fingers. As he leaned forward and placed it on the table in front of Malcolm Edwards, the absorbed watchers caught the flash of gold inside the leather case. Admiration ascended from the watchers in a united gasp. Fastened to the white kid lining of the case were five gold pins. They were fashioned in the form of the South American condor, wings outspread. The design of the pin was not more than two inches across

between the wing tips, and about an inch and a quarter in depth. The wings were outlined in tiny emeralds and the eyes of the condor were also of emeralds, small but remarkably beautiful stones.

"*Hermosa* (beautiful)!" The Spanish word rose involuntarily to Edwards' lips. "These must be *muy viejo* (very old)."

"They are truly old and are *los encantos.* None knows who made them, or how old they are. I have one, also. That makes six. Once there were seven, but one was stolen by a bandit. These were my father's treasures. Now they are mine. I give them to you to keep you from harm. Nothing can harm you while you wear *los encantos.* You may look death in the face and not die. You will please give them to your companeros, my Chief."

"Now we *are* going some!" was Ralph's enthusiastic reception of his new talisman. He pinned it on the lapel of his corduroy coat and paraded proudly about, holding the lapel out in order to show off his glittering new possession.

"Here's a bunch of emeralds we didn't dig up ourselves, Topa did the digging." Bret bubbled over with pride of the ancient, beautiful bit of jewelry which he had come into thus unexpectedly. Jimmy was equally elated and pleased with the Inca's generous gift.

Topa displayed a quiet satisfaction in seeing

the five Americanos pin on the little golden condors. When Mr. Edwards demurred at the idea of taking away from the Inca the most treasured of his possessions, the brown man merely shook an obstinate head, saying: "It is my will to give you *los encantos*. They are for you; to keep you from danger."

He acknowledged the boys' light-hearted thank-yous with jerky little nods, saying protestingly in Spanish: "*Es nada* (It is nothing)." He could not help showing his pleasure, however, in a half embarrassed smile when the boys enthusiastically made room for him at the table and proceeded gaily to serve him with breakfast.

In spite of his grave, somber air, Malcolm Edwards had estimated the Inca's age at not more than twenty-three or four years. He seemed to enjoy the hail-fellow-well-met manners of the lively Adventure Boys though he could not understand the continuous fire of joking remarks which they kept up in English as they buoyantly finished breakfast. After breakfast they further won his secret liking by the energy with which they helped him load the mules.

It was nearly half-past seven o'clock when the jewel-hunting outfit of six men, six ponies and ten mules drew up in the courtyard in formation for the start. The rate of speed at which the outfit would travel must be deter-

mined, necessarily, by that of the mules. While the riders would head the cavalcade they could not ride their ponies faster than a walk as it was important to keep the mules in sight at all times. Due to the moderately heavy packs which the strong, wiry Andean mules bore, and also to the mule habit of occasionally balking, the progress of the animal would not be swift, although its steadiness would help overcome this unavoidable handicap.

"What will become of the baggage department of the outfit, if one of these mules makes a slip?" Bret asked more than half seriously of Green. "If it happens to be the top-line donkey——Good-night! Some mules avalanche down the mountain."

"Ask Topa." Green glanced mischievously at the Inca who was standing beside the mules. Hatless, his straight black hair brushed carelessly back from his broad forehead, he resembled a chocolate brown statue. "Guess I'll ask him if he'd like one of my cloth caps. I've not yet seen him wear a hat. These Indians mostly wear their hats, even to bed."

"You ask him about the mule slide," laughed Bret. "How I do hate to have you wear out your voice on my account."

"You sound sorry." Green grinned to himself as he repeated Bret's question to Topa.

"Mules like these my Chief has, are very good kind. These mules don't slip much on the

mountain side. Their harness is on purpose for steep trails. This helps them so they can carry heavy loads and not fall. Not many more mules like this in Peru, I think. Where you buy them?"

"In Cuzco," Green answered. "Mr. Edwards bought them at a sale of horses and mules that came from a *plantacion* near Cuzco. The owner of the *plantacion* died and left it to his son. The son wanted to sell it."

"What was the name of the man who died?" Topa fastened a bright, inquiring gaze upon the sailor. "Perhaps you did not hear his name."

"Yes, I heard it. I've forgotten it, though." Green wrinkled his forehead in an effort to recall the name of the previous owner of the outfit's horses and mules. "Wait a minute. It's coming back to me. It was——" He stopped. Now I have it. It was Villa—Villac——"

"Villac Remaca!" ejaculated Topa softly. "You are lucky to have the ponies and mules from Cabezo. That was the name of Remaca's plantation because it stood on a hilltop. He had only the finest horses and mules. So Remaca is dead. I had not heard that," he added, musingly.

"Did you know him, Topa?" Green rapped out the question with crisp directness.

"I have heard much of him," Topa evaded. "Some have said he was a Capa. If a Capa

heard me say that, he would try to kill me."

"You are not talking to a Capa, so you should worry," Green told him with a half grim smile. He wondered just how much Topa really knew about the masked, black-cloaked robbers who had attempted to run off the ponies two nights before. He did not believe the Inca treacherous. Still, he did not entirely trust Topa, in spite of the brown man's whimsically generous gift to the outfit of the golden, emerald-studded condor pins. "How many black cloaks are there in this killers' union?" he questioned satirically.

Topa cast a peculiar sidelong glance at Green, then, without replying to Stanley's question he made a sudden turn and headed for the gateway through which he promptly disappeared.

"Hey, you haven't told me yet what Chocolate Caramel said about the mules," Bret now complained to the sailor.

Green told him, at the same time adjusting his pony's rein to suit him. He sprang into saddle just as Topa reappeared through the gateway accompanied by Vesano. The little man had recovered from his panic of apprehension enough to come out to the courtyard and say "Adios" to the departing jewel hunters.

"*Tenga usted cuidado* (Look out)," he warned the adventurers, shaking a cautioning

finger at the party, now in saddle and ready to move on to new scenes and adventures. "*Recuardo* (remember)! Thirteen Americanos have gone from here up the mountains to hunt for the *esmeraldas* and never returned."

"We'll do better than that," Ralph flashed back, laughing. "Five Americanos are going from here up the mountains this morning, and five are coming back. Just wait, and see if we don't. See that?" He pointed to the beautiful little golden bird now fastened to the lapel of his corduroy shooting coat. "That's our safe conduct badge."

"*El encanto,*" murmured Vesano, looking impressed. He shook hands with each of the riders in turn, his sharp-featured face owlishly solemn, and without saying a word.

"All right. Go ahead, Topa." Mr. Edwards signaled to the Indian to start the mules. The little procession began to move forward.

Suddenly Vesano's arms went up over his head in a sweeping circular gesture. He kept them raised, at the same time mumbling something in Spanish but too rapidly for his hearers to catch the import. He brought his arms down with a final flop, calling out: "I have made an old Spanish *encanto* (spell) for you. I hope it will keep you from harm. I do not believe it will help you much. You are foolish to go."

With this cheerful opinion Vesano began walking along beside the now moving caval-

cade, still gabbling to himself in his native tongue. Outside the gateway he paused to watch the riders pass through it and onto the stretch of pebbly road that began behind the ancient inn and continued a little way up the valley.

"*Adios,* Vesano! Don't cry!" Ralph yelled the flippant admonition in English. "Buck up, dear college chum! You can't lose us, so why fidget?"

Paullo Topa also called to Vesano in Quichua: "Tell no one who comes to you where I have gone."

"I will tell no one," promised Vesano, "but," he shook his black head with ominous prediction, "*he* will find out for himself and follow you. You are a dead man, Paullo Topa, a dead man before you even take the trail up the mountains."

CHAPTER VII

THE MAN ON THE ROCK

THE adventurers followed the pebbly road on its winding course which curved around one end of the valley town until it cut off at a spreading succession of terraces, striking testimonials of the energy of the Inca and his forbears.

At this point of their route the cavalcade swung onto a stretch of inclined road of ancient Inca handiwork, one worn smooth by the passing of countless feet. The riders followed it for half a mile then struck the main valley road of the Urubamba River along which they proposed to travel until they reached a point on the trail which corresponded with one marked on a map of the region.

Malcolm Edwards had come into possession of the map through the agency of an explorer friend who had been one of the party on the fortunate Peruvian expedition of several years previous which had uncovered the ruins of the famous Inca city, Macchu Picchu. As a consequence the jewel man was possessed of valuable information relative to the lost Inca city,

the outskirts of which the adventurers would touch on their way up the mountains. He was also well posted concerning the topography of the region where the Adventure Boys intended to prospect for emeralds.

That day they made steady, if slow, progress along the bottom of the valley, traveling the ancient road and marveling at the wonders they glimpsed in passing, the amazing landmarks of a vanished race. Toward sunset the cavalcade halted at a grassy rise of ground on the upper side of the road, there to make the night's camp. Only a few yards from the grassy campsite a narrow white cascade threw a silver sheet of gurgling water down into a little natural rock basin. Just beyond the waterfall, was the beginning of a trail which led in a roundabout fashion up one of the lower mountains of the range, over its forest-crowned top and across a narrow ridge of land almost bridge-like in formation, to the next mountain, a giant in height and snow-tipped.

"For safety this country certainly has the veldt skinned to death," announced Ralph with a long-drawn thankful sigh, as he left his pony's back with a flying leap and sketched half a dozen wide fanciful steps on the grass by way of exercising his long legs, weary from the saddle. "Just about now in sunny Africa I'd be doing a strong-arm act with my snake-stick, trying to chase the poison pets off the lot. I'm

jolly glad I'm not there. I've only seen one snake to-day. It was in a hurry and didn't stop to bite."

"It does seem queer not to have to keep an eye out for lions, leopards and mambas," Jimmy agreed. "This campsite is a mild, tame-looking place. Oh, Christmas! Betcha we'll sleep to-night! It's a whole lot cooler up here than it was down in the valley this morning and we haven't come far up out of it, either."

"That's nothing," Green declared, now off his pony and rummaging in his knapsack for the little thermometer he always carried. "The temperature up here is likely to vary from fifty to eighty degrees. We'll find rolling up in blankets very comfortable to-night."

"I'd like to bag a bear right off the bat," Ralph declared longingly. "Hey, Topa," he called in Spanish to the Indian who was deftly unloading the mules preparatory to watering them, "didn't you say there were plenty of bears in the mountains? How about leading us to one to-morrow?"

"Si, plenty of bears." The Inca confirmed his own previous statement. "We see pronto (soon) higher up in the mountains."

"But how about going hunting to-morrow," Ralph persisted.

The Indian lifted his shoulders doubtfully. "It is not for me to say," he answered. "Your

father say 'yes,' then I must try show you where to hunt because he is the chief."

"You don't care to go hunting to-morrow, do you, Topa?" Mr. Edwards asked shrewdly. He had caught the distinct vibration of doubt in the Inca's tone.

"No." Topa gave a half relieved sigh. "Best we go on now up the mountain. Go quickly next mountain, my Chief, while the weather is good. Your map show go to next mountain. We take very narrow trail last part of the way. We can not ride it in storm. We fall down the mountain then, fall two thousand feet."

"That puts the kibosh on the bear hunt," cried Ralph good-humoredly. His lively mind had entertained the idea of a bear hunt the next day merely as an innovation.

"Yes, it does," his father said decidedly. "Believe me, Ralph," he continued in a low tone, "we were lucky to secure this fellow's services. He's a bang-up guide as well as muleteer. He tells me he has been familiar with these mountains since he was a muchacho (small boy)."

Paullo Topa gave an involuntary approving nod as Malcolm Edwards vetoed Ralph's proposal of a bear hunt on the morrow, agreeing with Topa that the travelers should go steadily on their chosen route for the present, at least.

Supper, cooked on the oil stove, consisted

of roast mutton, warmed up, which they had brought from the inn, boiled potatoes, green corn, coffee and gingersnaps. It tasted good to the adventurers at that fresh, invigorating altitude.

Aside from the original beating up the campers had given the camp area they had marked off for themselves, they were not obliged for safety's sake to be continually on the watch for savage beasts or venomous snakes. There was room for them all, rolled up in blankets, on the floor of the snake-proof, insect-proof tent, and almost no possibility of being disturbed by any kind of wild animal. Occasionally a jaguar was to be found ranging the region the adventurers were traveling, so Topa told them. Such as he recalled having seen had been very large, strong and fierce of their kind and ready to attack on sight of either man or beast. Like his cousin the African leopard, the South American jaguar is fond of roosting in trees and then springing down upon his prey.

Sun-up next morning saw the outfit on the trail again. They soon found their mountain-climbing had begun in earnest. Up and still up the grassy slope of the mountain they won a slow ascent, at the same time working a round-about upward course to where the trail grew rockier and steeper, giving the ponies and mules scarcely a foothold.

It took the riders nearly all day to achieve a point on the mountain where a rocky little bluff furnished them with a spot on which to make a one-night camp. It was considerably colder than their camp of the night before and the shivering adventurers found the warmth of extra blankets grateful.

Dado, the young African, who had been with the Adventure Boys on their diamond seeking expedition in the South African veldt, had acted as cook for the outfit. It now devolved upon the five men to take turns doing the cooking, a proceeding which brought about endless merry argument.

Stanley Green was the most experienced cook of the lot. Ralph and Jimmy were fairly proficient in the culinary line. Bret was a flivver. Malcolm Edwards could cook, but disliked the task. Knowing this, the four young men mercifully ruled him out of the "chuck department" and squabbled good-humoredly over it among themselves.

"I'm going to feed the hungry this morning," Bret announced grandly as he suddenly whisked into view, rosy-faced and bright-eyed from around a bush-grown corner where he had been washing the sleep from his eyes in a bubbling mountain spring.

"You mean you're going to poison the outfit," chaffed Jimmy.

"Nothing like it. I'm going to boil water, boil eggs——"

"Eggs! Ya-a-a-a-a-a!" Ralph and Jimmy jeered in concert.

"Where are you going to get 'em?" Jimmy demanded with grinning derision.

"Going to ask the birds for 'em?" Green joined in the joshing.

"Wrong-o," Bret returned placidly. "I'm going to take 'em right out of my knapsack. I bought 'em in old Olly burg and kept 'em for a nice surprise. You freshies don't deserve 'em. I may change my mind, you know. I may treat Oom Boss Edwards—and nobody else." He stared hard at his three snickering comrades.

"Oh, have a heart! Bacon and eggs would be corking for breakfast." Jimmy changed his tone from teasing to coaxing. "I never thought about buying 'em in the market square."

"Not everybody is thoughtful." Bret tapped his head significantly.

"I'll let you tell it," Jimmy retorted.

"Where's Topa?" Bret inquired, his eyes springing from one point to another about the camp in a vain search for the Inca muleteer.

The others had already gathered about the outfit's green and white oilcloth on which smoked an enamel platter of bacon and another of eggs. Green had easily persuaded Bret that

eggs fried in bacon grease had boiled eggs "beaten a mile." There were also large hunks of toothsome Peruvian brown bread, rather sweet, of which the outfit had laid in a goodly supply. Ralph had made the coffee which was sending up a tantalizing aroma in the big coffee pot.

"He must have gone on up the trail a ways. I saw him poking around among the bushes up there while I was making coffee." Ralph glanced up toward the spot where he had last seen Topa. The brown man was not in sight now. Ralph raised his voice in a loud halloo. He shouted, "Topa; hey there, Topa! Come and get it!" half a dozen times.

"For the love of Pete! How'd you get away over there?" Ralph finally yelled at top voice as he spied a familiar figure, draped in a bright-hued blanket standing on a small projecting point of rock far to the left of the camp and just visible from the rocky bluff on which the outfit was camping.

The Inca had seemingly not heard Ralph's lusty shouts. He did not look toward the bluff. Instead, he turned and disappeared from sight of the trailers as by magic.

"Gee whiz!" ejaculated Ralph. "Some fade-out! Where the mischief did he go? There must be a drop right behind where he stood. And he took it."

"He blew without sending back a single yip," Jimmy commented wonderingly.

"He's not what I'd call a strictly noisy proposition," Green said lightly. "He talks more than young Zuni did, though. *He* certainly was a tongue-tied scout." Green referred to Manaco, the Zunan, who had stepped out of the heart of the jungle to be their companion of the trail on their recent expedition over the veldt.

"He's a queer duck," was Bret's reflective opinion. "Do you remember the way he tore off that Quichua lingo to Green the day we met him? He's not had an attack of talk-itis since."

The object of their casual remarks suddenly appeared from around the corner nearest the spring, his colorful blanket trailing down over one shoulder.

"*Buenos dias, amigo.* You're lucky to get any breakfast," Mr. Edwards greeted. "This high altitude has surely bucked up our appetites." Characteristic of the jewel man he made no allusion to Topa's absence.

"*Buenos dias,* my Chief. I am hungry," the Inca responded, slipping into his usual place at the oilcloth between Ralph and Green.

Ralph had made this arrangement of place at meals so that Green would be on one side of Topa to translate his Quichua into English, while Ralph, on the other side, could interpret the Indian's Spanish. From the more humble

post as muleteer, Paullo Topa was fast becoming indispensable to the adventurers. His knowledge of the mountain region the outfit was traveling, and the expert manner in which he handled the pack train of mules, made him a prize to the trailers.

"*Que le pas a usted, companero* (what happened to you, comrade)?" Ralph blithely showed no hesitancy about taking Topa jestingly to task for not answering his hail. "What happened to your ears about the time I started yelling? How did you get to the spring so quickly from away over on that rock?"

"What rock?" The Inca asked with an ingenuous glance which Ralph mistook as feigned.

"That one. Right over there. See." Ralph raised his left arm, brushing shoulders with the Inca, and pointed to where beyond the bluff they could glimpse the projecting bit of rock through the open screen of trees. "That's where you were when I was hallo-ing at you. And you made a bluff at being deaf!" he accused laughingly.

"No. I heard you call 'Topa' very loud when I came near the spring. I was not——"

"Sure, you heard me then, and when you were over on that rock point, too," Ralph gayly interrupted. "Never mind. I'll let you almost believe you got away with a deaf-and-dumb act."

"No, no: I was not——" The Inca stopped

abruptly. A shadow of distress passed over his brown features, leaving them briefly troubled. For an instant he was silent, then, unexpectedly, a smile broke out upon his firm mouth. "You saw me like this?" He raised his arms, indicating the folds of his blanket. "You are sure you saw me like this?" His tone had become lightly inquiring.

"Surest thing you know," Ralph replied. "We all saw you."

"So that is then the proof I was there," the Inca returned in a more serious tone. Immediately afterward he said: "Is it your will to start soon on our way, my Chief? We have far to go before we reach the top of this mountain and cross it. That will be a good place to camp. To-morrow, at sun-up, we will cross on the very narrow, bad trail from this mountain over to the other."

"Good work," the jewel man approved. "I'd like to cover the miles to our emerald prospect as quickly as possible. You can't go too fast to suit me. Come on, Boys. Let's pack up and be on our way, pronto."

The Inca's wily question to Malcolm Edwards switched the current of the Adventure Boys' thoughts from him to the day's journey. Green, who had been busy poring over the route map while Ralph was joshing Topa, had happened not to observe the Indian's flash of perturbation. Its real import had entirely

escaped the others. Topa, however, went about his work, wearing an expression of somber gravity. The lively sallies of the boys, flying back and forth as the youngsters worked, brought no smiles to his sober features, although he was beginning already to understand and be amused by their funny, colorful slang.

From time to time, he halted in his work to straighten up and cast a displeased speculative glance toward the point of rock where the Adventure Boys had lately seen him, seemingly, appear. Topa was alsolutely certain of at least one fact—He had not been within two hundred feet of the point of rock upon which he, supposedly, had stood in view of the campers. The identity of his double, the man on the rock, as well as why the double had so abruptly appeared and as abruptly disappeared were mysteries which Paullo Topa could best explain.

CHAPTER VIII

OVER THE BRINK

"GOING up!" Jimmy sang out with emphasis as his pony, Winner, set his hard little hoofs steadily and firmly into the rock-strewn mountain side, forcing his way up the steep slope by exerting every particle of strength in his wiry body.

First glance at the precipitous ascent awaiting them after they had broken camp and traveled the roundabout mountain trail for a mile or more, had slightly dismayed the adventurers. They had wondered if the ponies would really be equal to the task before them. As for the mules—it had seemed almost a foregone conclusion that they could not avoid slipping, burdened as they were.

Both the ponies and mules had made the ascent surely and well. Jimmy's sing-song announcement had in it a degree of satisfaction because of the success of the first real mountain climbing in which he had ever before figured. The ponies had now reached the ridged level of the mountain top. The mules were coming up sure-footedly behind them.

It had taken the outfit all that morning to reach the thick belt of forest which spread its dark green luxuriance well over the mountain top. It was at the edge of the forest the adventurers had now stopped for a rest and breathing spell as well as to cook the noon-day meal. The keen, crisp air, pungently scented with pine and balsam, had made the riders ravenous.

"All at the top, and not a man missing!" Stanley Green was off his pony, Chum, the instant the animal's feet had touched the level of the mountain top. He snatched his black felt sombrero from his head and waved it triumphantly in the air in time to his cheerful announcement. One after another, his companions gained the level with him.

"Some climb!" Jimmy blew forth a strenuous sigh. "Gee, how I hated to leave the biggest half of the work to Winner. He has me beaten forty ways as a steeplejack."

"These ponies are a peachy lot," Ralph declared with enthusiasm. "After their performance this morning, I'll back 'em to scramble up any old mountainside where there's a fraction of a place for a pony's feet."

His comrades shared his delighted opinion. Ralph happened to mention the name of Villac Remaca, the former owner of the ponies. Stanley Green was reminded to repeat to them what Paullo Topa had told him concerning his belief that Remaca had been a member of the outlaw

Capas. In the midst of an animated fire of conjecture about the Capas, Topa reached the level behind the last of the mules.

"Here's the fellow with the right dope about the Capas."

"You said the Capas lived high up on the mountain, Topa," Ralph began promptly. "Which mountain? Not this one, I'll say. It's only half-size compared to the one we're going to tackle before long. How about that one? Any Capas capering around on top of it?"

The Indian shot a half-startled glance at Ralph. "Capas pass over this mountain, *quizas* (maybe), to go down into the valley. They don't stay long on this mountain, I think. On the high mountain where we go, pronto, is their cave."

"How do you know it's on old Snowboy?" Bret quizzed, shading his eyes from the white glitter of the snow-capped mountain top in the warm noon-day sun.

"I know it is there, Señor Bret," Topa replied tranquilly in Spanish. "One who knows, one who was once a prisoner in their cave told me."

"Is that why you were so down on our coming to these mountains the day we first met you?" Green questioned. "Only you laid all the trouble up here to the gods of misfortune."

"*Es verdad* (It is true). I have not changed my belief." Topa nodded solemnly. "This I

know. All the trouble comes from the *esmeraldas.* Perhaps, long ago, the Spanish *conquistadores* (conquerors) made the mountain gods angry by their greed, for the wretched green stones. So they punish those, who come to the mountains to seek the *esmeraldas.* Some say the Capas are the gods who have come back to the mountain again," the Inca ended ruminatively.

"Oh, shucks! You don't believe any such stuff as that, really, do you, Topa?" Ralph could not keep amusement out of his face at the brown man's serious acceptance of mythical gods.

"I have seen strange things in these mountains." Topa refused to give a direct answer.

"But not the Shadow god of the Pool," Ralph tacked on mischievously.

"No. No man sees the Shadow god and lives to tell of it," Topa spoke with a kind of stern finality which was meant to discourage further questioning on Ralph's part. "I go to find a spring," he said, and turned away without another word.

"According to the map, we're due to strike the gods, the Capas and our first emerald prospect all on the same old mountain," Green smiled as he spoke. "It wouldn't surprise me to find a gang of Capas on the ground over there." He jerked his head in the direction of the towering, snow-capped mountain. It was

in alignment with the mountain they were now on, but almost three times the height.

"Prospecting for stones, you mean?" Malcolm Edwards looked up from perusing the map which he had taken from an inside breast pocket of his shooting coat.

"Yes." Green looked carefully about him to ascertain if Topa was in sight, and returning. The Inca was nowhere to be seen. "This whole lay-out has a hump in it somewhere," he continued wisely. "Topa knows what it's all about, but torture wouldn't drag it from his lips."

"Yes, Topa knows something he ought to tell me about——" Malcolm Edwards stopped. He made a gesture of vexed bafflement. "I can't tell what it's all about," he confessed.

"I get you. There's something stirring. Only it's hard to pick out the guff from the facts," was Green's rejoinder.

"The guff, we'll say, is all this superstition about the gods except one thing." Edwards added this pertinent exception. "There's some dark fact behind that Shadow god of the Pool. It sounds to me like some sort of murder trap with a human fiend in the background to work it. I've run into such mysteries, now and then, in my travels. I presume you have, too. For instance, recall how old Wola had the Zunans bluffed into believing that big python was an evil spirit."

"I thought of that. This Shadow-god business may be on a par with that snake yarn. It's nothing in the snake line this time, though. Too cold for the big snakes up here. Well, maybe we'll find the answer to the riddle when we least expect." The sailor's tone was only mildly interested. "Tell you the truth, I want to hunt emeralds; not wild beasts, robbers or savages. I'm all fed up with 'em."

"I understand how you feel. Same here. That's the only drawback there is attached to jewel seeking. There is a deep satisfaction in uncovering jewels of any kind in their natural state. Not because of their monetary value. Only because of the pleasure of finding them," was the jewel man's view of the matter.

"I suspect these Capas are at the bottom of the whole thing," he went on speculatively. "Well, we'll be across the ridge and on the next mountain before sunset. According to Topa, these confounded robbers claim it as theirs. We may have our troubles with them. I have never yet allowed myself to be chased away from a good jewel prospect by hearsay. A rascal's way of clearing off a good jewel prospect for himself is by starting a bad rumor about it."

The return of the Indian with the news that he had located a spring two or three hundred yards further into the thick green forest,

brought the talk between Stanley Green and Mr. Edwards to an end.

Owing to Malcolm Edwards' ambitious determination to cross the narrow ridge, which connected the mountain they were on with its lofty companion, before sunset, lunch that day was hurriedly prepared and as hurriedly eaten. The ridge itself was not more than half a mile across, so close together were the two mountains. First, however, came a journey of over two miles through the pine woods to the point where the belt of woodland ended in an oval, open grassy space, sparsely dotted with saplings and low bushes.

The green oval sloped gradually down for a few feet to meet the curious bridge-like ridge which extended straight across to meet the neighboring mountain at not more than half way up its snow-crowned height. None of the party except Topa had yet seen more than the diagram of the ridge soon to be crossed. When, after a fairly rapid ride over a well-defined forest trail, the riders finally gained the grassy oval, a general cry went up from them at the narrowness of the cross trail they were presently to ride.

"Great guns!" Jimmy dismounted and walked to the end of the oval where the foot-wide ridge began. The ridge itself was the top of the sprawling western side of the low mountain they were now on, both sides of the

ridge sloped precipitately down for a thousand feet or more. "I never trained my pony to be a tight-rope wonder. I'm not crazy about trying it myself," Jimmy complained ruefully.

"How far is it to the other side?" Bret was also eyeing the ridge doubtfully.

"Not more than half a mile. Don't think about it, you and Jimmy. When it comes time to cross the ridge let your ponies do the stepping and the worrying," advised Mr. Edwards.

"You better cross now, my Chief," Topa advocated earnestly to the jewel man. "Then you will have plenty time to make camp, fix everything all right for night. Now it is bright daylight and easy to go across the *espinazo* (ridge)."

"Good dope, Oom Dad," put in Ralph. "Just to show you two flops how daring I am, I'll head the line across." He beamed tantalizingly upon Bret and Jimmy.

"Oh, gooseberries!" Jimmy made derisive retaliation.

"Yes, a couple of smashed ones if you don't watch out."

"Tell it to the birds. You can't scare us," Bret asserted witheringly.

"I like to hear you——" Ralph made a quick pause. Mingling with the sound of his own voice his acute ears had picked up the faint, distant cry of another voice. "Hark!" He raised a hand for silence, alert and listening.

Yes. There it was again; an appealing voice, barely to be heard above the light sigh of the breeze as it rustled gently among the leaves.

"Hear that?" He turned to his comrades, lounged on the grass for a brief rest, preparatory to crossing the ridge.

"I hear." Topa sprang up from where he had been reclining full length on the grass and ran down the slope toward the ridge.

"So do I." Stanley Green got to his feet and hastily followed the Indian.

Next moment the rest of the group of adventurers were also on their way to join Green and the Inca. Above the gentle prolonged sigh of the wind they had once more caught the sound of that faint, far-off call.

"It sounded as though it might have come from this direction, but there's no one here," Green said as the six trailers, one after another, made port on the small oval which adjoined the ridge.

"There it goes again!" Bret was first to catch a repetition of the distant cry. "It sounds like 'H-a-a-a-a-a.' Maybe it's 'Help' the fellow is yelling. He yells it in the same tone every time."

"I believe it *is* 'Help' he's calling," Malcolm Edwards spoke with considerable excitement. "It's a man calling undoubtedly. Strange I can't distinguish from which direction the call

is coming. How about you, Green? Can you pick it up?"

"Not yet." The sound had stopped now. The sailor was waiting breathlessly for it to come again. He leaned forward in a listening attitude, eager to catch the first wave of the indistinct sound.

"H-a-a-a-a-a-a!" The call seemed a trifle clearer. Two or three repetitions of it and the listeners detected in the cry a note of frantic appeal. Some one was in danger and sending out a desperate appeal for help.

"Ho!" With a sudden shout Topa darted down the little slope and out upon the narrow ridge. He kept on going, speeding over the foot-wide trail with winged feet. On he went. He, at least, could now hear the appealing cry of "Hel-l-l-l-p! Hel-l-l-l-p-p!"

Presently he stopped short on the narrow trail. Next he dropped to his knees and began an alert, anxious peering over the edge of the drop on the left-hand side. His black eyes leaped from point to point of the sheer declivity. Then he sent out a ringing hallo: "Where are you, *companero* (comrade)?" First in Spanish, then in Quichua.

Green had now run out upon the ridge and was racing toward the spot where the Inca knelt, scanning the precipitous drop. Instead of the heavy forest growth which covered the top of the low mountain, the sheer perilous

sides of the ridge, over which the Inca's eyes roved ceaselessly, were rocky and scanty of verdure. It abounded in great drifts of crumbling yellowed rock, out of which sprang gnarled and misshapen trees.

"I can't see him, but I can hear him," the Inca told Green in Quichua as the latter came up to where he knelt. "Look for him down the other side."

The sailor was already on his knees and scanning the other side of the ridge with a pair of eyes long trained to pick up distant objects at sea. He began shouting, "Where are you?" first in Spanish, then in English.

To his puzzled surprise he could now hear the answering cry: "Here." It seemed to come from no very great distance below where he had stationed himself, but he could make out no one in spite of the sparse vegetation and bare yellow rock formations.

"Hurray!" Green sent up a sudden lusty shout of triumph. It followed a weak response of, "Down here. I am in the top of a little tree. Hurry, or it will be too late."

CHAPTER IX

THE PROOF

"I SEE him," the sailor yelled, almost losing his own balance in the excitement of his discovery. "Hanged if he isn't roosting in the top of one of those queer-looking trees. He's not very far down the side, either. What do you know about that? He must have started on that thousand-foot drop and the tree caught him. I'll say he's not more than forty or fifty feet below us."

By the time Green had shouted his discovery to the others Topa had changed over to his comrade's side of the ridge. As soon as his glance came to rest upon the dwarfed, twisted tree he sprang to his feet, crying out in alarm to Stanley: "I go quick for ropes, *amigo*. This man is in a tree that has roots growing on the rocks. These roots break away, pronto, because the tree is small. *Quizas* (perhaps) he is quite heavy. I can't see him well. Watch him, *amigo*. The tree may go down before I come back."

Topa raced to camp for ropes, leaving Green to watch the treed man and talk a little with

him. "Hello, down there," he shouted at top voice. "Hold steady. We are going to help you up soon. Understand?"

"Yes, yes. I hear; understand." The answer came more distinctly than before. "Please hurry. I am heavy. The tree shakes."

"We're going to pull you up all right," the sailor cheerily assured. "The ropes are strong enough to bear your weight. Can you put a slip noose over your head and under your shoulders and make fast?" was his anxious question. "Or, are you hanging on with both hands?"

"The top of this tree holds me *bueno* (well). I can use my hands to fasten the rope. Weight the rope so I shall not miss it. I thank you for coming to help me." This addition brought the flicker of a smile to Green's handsome features. He decided then that he already liked a man who could be courteous when marooned in the top of a shaking tree over a thousand foot drop.

Bret's and Jimmy's flash of squeamishness about walking the ridge had vanished with the exciting discovery that a man was hanging between life and death on the mountain side. The excitement of the moment sent them racing intrepidly out upon the narrow footing of the ridge with Mr. Edwards, Ralph and Topa. The rescue party carried three coils of strong tough rope, a couple of stout stakes and the invaluable camp mallet.

"It's doubtful about driving the stakes, but we can try it," Malcolm Edwards said to Green as he came within a few feet of the sailor. The narrowness of the ridge made it impossible for the rescuers to do other than range themselves in a line, ready to do their part at need.

Mr. Edwards was already testing the hard-packed, rocky soil with the sharp point of one of the stakes he purposed to drive into it. He found it hard and unyielding to an extent that would warrant no crumbling away of the earth when the stakes were pounded into it. These stakes he planned to use as an extra prevention against a slipping of one end of the rope when a man should be tied to the rope's other end.

Green drove in the stakes with swift powerful blows of the mallet while Mr. Edwards held them in position. Meanwhile Ralph, Bret and Jimmy shouted encouragement to the now hopeful man in the tree. Topa was occupied in knotting together two coils of rope, then weighting the resulting double-length rope ready for the downward cast.

"Even what little wind there is blowing catches that tree and shakes it!" Bret cried anxiously.

"You fellows had best hurry, or—buzz-z-t! Just like that!" Jimmy let one hand strike sharply against the other, then made a gesture as of something hurtling downward.

"Ready," declared Mr. Edwards' steady

tones. Topa had just taken a double hitch in one end of the rope around the two stout stakes, set side by side, and about a foot apart. "Only two of us can pull up on the rope at once. You and Green had best take it, Topa." The jewel man hefted the stone Topa had tied to the other end of the rope for ballast.

"Suppose the fellow down there can't tie himself fast for the haul-up?" was Bret's concerned doubt.

"You'll see me go down on another rope and tie him myself." The sailor's jaws set with determination.

"All right, Topa. Let her go." Mr. Edwards gave the signal.

Topa began paying out the rope. Soon it was dangling within a foot or two of the man in the tree. Came a moment of breathless watching which ended in a concerted triumphant yell as they saw the right hand of the treed man reach out and grasp the weighted end of the rope.

"He has it, thank goodness!" was the jewel man's hearty exclamation. "Now if he can make fast, we'll haul him up, pronto."

Came another interval of suspense as those above strained their eyes to watch the man below them untie the weighting stone, around which Mr. Edwards had fastened the noose he had first placed in the rope. He was evidently deft-fingered. Within five minutes after

he had caught the rope he called up to his rescuers: "I am ready."

Bracing their feet as well as they could on the narrow trail, Topa and Green manned the rope. Slowly and steadily they pulled. Little by little the man at the rope's end began to rise. Soon he was above the top of the little tree which had mercifully held him, and drawing steadily nearer to the top. The men at the rope had need of their strength in hauling up the stranger. He was not specially tall, but he was decidedly heavy. The nearer they drew him to the surface of the ridge, the heavier he seemed to become.

"I'd rather be here than where he is now," Bret asserted watching the roped man, still dangling in mid-air.

"Oh, I don't know. I think I'd like to try that stunt," Jimmy said jokingly. "Only I'd want to be sure the rope wouldn't break."

"Good work!" was Mr. Edwards' exultant cry as the lately imperiled man was drawn up to the surface of the ridge. Green and Topa each took hold of one of his arms and helped him to his feet on the narrow trail.

He swayed a trifle unsteadily for a moment, then regained his balance and said with a game little laugh: "All right now."

His rescuers saw a rather short man, broad of shoulder and somewhat plump. His dark brown eyes were large and very bright. He

had an immense shaggy mane of dark brown hair, thrown off his forehead in a careless natural wave. He had a good sized nose and a straight-lipped, pleasant mouth. When he laughed he disclosed white, sound teeth and his whole gypsyish face lighted into good-humored brightness.

"I thank you, *caballeros* (gentlemen)." These were his next words, gratefully spoken, as he glanced directly at Green and Topa. "I thought death must come soon when the little tree would blow away. I have call for long time, till I am tired; so tired. When I call, the tree shake more and more. Then you hear me. Ah, that is when I have prayed for help. *Santos cielos* (great Heavens)! How glad I am when hear you call!" He clasped his plump hands together in a transport of grateful emotion.

"We're certainly glad we heard you," Ralph said emphatically. "You were on your way to an awful drop. Good luck was with you, or you'd never have stuck in the top of that tree."

"How long had you been in the tree when we first hailed you?" Stanley Green asked sympathetically.

"Since the sun came up," was the stranger's prompt reply. "This morning while still dark, I start across this bad bit of trail on my mule. I was on the high mountain over there for two weeks, then must run from there in the night because Capas are after me to kill me. I have

good mule, go fast as caballo (horse). Yesterday, I hide all day near this trail, but over there." The narrator jerked his heavy-maned head toward the towering mountain. "But I don't know one Capa follow me when I ride my mule across here this morning in the dark. My mule knew well how to go, but the Capa came up behind me, very quiet. I think must have burn my mule's flank in the dark. My mule make a big noise like horse when is hurt; make a big jump and fall down the mountain side. He go to the bottom of valley, my poor mule, but I stick in the tree."

"You've shown good nerve." Green laid a light hand on the rescued man's shoulder. "What you need now is something to eat and a chance to rest. You're Spanish, aren't you?"

"*Si, señor,*" came the answer in a pleased tone. "I am Pedro Roccos, of Chile. But I am not Indian. I am Spanish."

"I understand the difference." Green nodded pleasantly to the bright-eyed little man.

"About face, gang." Ralph now took a hand in matters. "Let's go back to where the horses are." He set the pace by turning about on the perilous path and starting for the green oval where the horses and mules were contentedly nibbling the abundant green grass.

"You're safe to come with us, Mr. Roccos," smiled Malcolm Edwards. "We are adventurers, but not bandits. We were just getting

ready to cross the ridge, ponyback, when one of our men heard you calling for help. We are on our way to the high mountain over there."

A hint of stubborn resolve crept into the smile. The gem hunter had no intention of turning back because of the bad report of the high mountain which Roccos had just made. The party had reached the oval now and had gathered rather curiously about the Spaniard.

"You go there?" Roccos cocked his shaggy head to one side with the air of a wise, bright-eyed bird. "Why you are going there?"

"Why did *you* go there?" countered the gem hunter, amused rather than affronted by the Spaniard's very personal question.

"Ah-h-h! Woo-of-f!" ejaculated Roccos, throwing up a pair of plump arms with a motion of dejection. "That is what I think I will tell you. I come away from that mountain because alone. No one to help me. I think you come, *quizas* (perhaps), like those men come to Peru, find the buried cities. You go there, I go with you, if you say I may go." His eyes traveled from one face to another of the group of men in search of concurrence of his openly-voiced surmise.

"Are you an explorer, Mr. Roccos?" was Mr. Edwards' direct question.

"For the buried cities and the old ruins and queer dishes I never look in the mountains."

The man from Chile lifted his well-padded shoulders half contemptuously.

"What's your specialty?" Ralph was regarding the plump little man with growing interest.

"I have hunt for gold in these mountains and found a little," Roccos answered with a straight-forwardness which stamped him as honest and dependable in the adventurers' already favorably formed opinion of him. "*Pero* (but) that is not why I went to the high mountain." He paused as though dubious about going on with something he had been on the verge of saying.

"Don't mind if I put it straight to you," Ralph half apologized beforehand. "Why did you go over there? What were you hunting?"

"*Ay di me!* That is it! What I hunt there, never yet I find. *Pero,* my great-grandfather say is there. He show me the proof." Pedro Roccos accompanied his indefinite words with an energetic nodding of his head. "Because you save me from death, you are *mes amigos.* So I show you this proof; tell you something I never tell any others."

The friendly little man from Chile began feeling inside his dark blue flannel blouse. From what was evidently an inside pocket of his blouse, directly under his heart, he drew a very tiny roll of white tissue paper. He spread open the small paper roll, laying it in the palm of his

left hand. In the center of the paper lay a dark green stone. It caught the light, emitting the subdued, ravishing gleam of the emerald, which is one of its chief charms. It was as large as an almond and had been highly polished.

A buzz of approbation greeted the sight of the emerald.

"Whew!" whistled Ralph. *"Now watch us get down to brass tacks."*

"This *hermosa* (beautiful) *esmeralda* come from the high mountain." Pedro lightly tapped the gleaming wonder with one finger. "In this mountain, my great-grandfather say, and I believe, is the lost Caverne de los Esmeraldas."

CHAPTER X

FLYING IN THE FACE OF DANGER

A SHOUT went up from the Adventure Boys which caused Pedro Roccos to roll half reproachful brown eyes at the noisy quartet. "*Es verdad* (It is true)," he declared solemnly.

"This isn't the first time we have heard of the cavern of emeralds," Mr. Edwards told the Spaniard. At the same time he cast a significant glance at Topa. The latter stood at one side of the group, his strong brown hands busy recoiling the rope which had lately been Pedro Roccos's salvation from death.

Topa raised his eyes from the rope to meet the friendly gaze of the gem hunter, his own expression inscrutable. Immediately he turned a half frowning look upon Roccos.

"You have heard before?" Roccos asked eagerly. "Where you hear? Who tell you?"

"One of my men had heard of it. He told us." The jewel man paused, waiting for Topa to speak. Topa, however, went on silently coiling rope.

"Will you allow me to examine the emerald?"

Ralph was looking interestedly at the jewel, his comrades' faces reflecting his interest.

"It is yours." Roccos made use of an old Spanish expression not intended to be literal. He willingly slid the emerald into Ralph's open, extended palm.

"*Great Cæsar's ghost!*" Ralph indulged in an appreciative whistle. "It's a green bird! And it came from that mountain?" He jerked an inquiring head in the direction of the snow-crowned height beyond the ridge.

"*Si.* This *esmeralda* my great-grandfather show me when I am the *muchacho* (small boy). He live till very old; almost an hundred years. He tell me about the cavern of *esmeraldas,*" Roccos asserted with excited positiveness.

"Take a squint at it, Oom Dad." Ralph offered the emerald to his father. "It's a pippin. I hope there are lots more like it over there."

"The *esmeraldas* are there," Pedro Roccos insisted. "My great-grandfather knew."

Malcolm Edwards had taken a strong magnifying glass from a coat pocket and was now training it upon the emerald in his open palm. "It is a remarkably fine stone," he pronounced. "Worth five thousand dollars, at least, perhaps ten thousand."

"*Ay mi madre!* Would that I could sell it and not be robbed!" Roccos exclaimed with forlorn fervor. "I have spent my last peso for a mule so that I might go and seek the *esme-*

raldas. Now where is that mule, and my saddle bags, and the little I had? Ah, *ay di me* (Oh, dear)!" The little man sighed audibly.

"Oh, cheer up," urged Stanley Green. "How long since you had a feed?"

"I had some crackers yesterday morning. I could not make a fire because I was hiding from the Capas." His eyes had not left off watching the jewel man examine the emerald. "The señor knows well the jewels," he broke out with shrewd conviction.

"Better believe he does," Green said, smiling.

"I am a jewel hunter," Mr. Edwards told the Spaniard. "So are these young men. That is why we are in Peru. We are not explorers."

"*Caracoles* (By Jingo)!" The plump little man seemed ready to drop with surprise at this quiet revelation of Edwards. "Always I hope meet some men who know how to hunt for the *esmeraldas,* but I think never find. Now I have found." He beamed upon the group with a delighted display of white teeth. "I hope you go to the mountain of the *esmeraldas,* and take me with you. I have not fear of anything, not even the Capas when I have *los hombres* (men) for company," he wound up almost pleadingly.

"You are welcome to go with us if you like." Mr. Edwards had mentally decided that Roccos would not be a detriment to the expedition. "We had expected to cross the ridge this after-

noon and settle camp before dark. Instead we will make camp here to-night. It will give you a chance to rest. Besides I should like you to tell us all you can about the emerald prospect over there, and also about the Capas. We had a run-in with those bandits at the inn at Ollantaytambo. They tried to run off our ponies and mules."

"*Santos cielos!*" Up went the Chilean's hands, seemingly a favorite gesture of his. "That is strange," he said wonderingly.

"It was more painful than strange," Jimmy cut in ruefully, one hand straying unconsciously to his lately injured head. "A Capa hit me a whack on the head with my own rifle," he explained.

"No, no. You don't understand me. I mean this: It is strange the Capas should have been lately in the valley." Roccos's shaggy brows drew together in a perplexed frown. "Never they go to such little towns. My grandfather say the Capas in his time rob only the very rich caballeros on their plantations. Since I am grown to be a man I hear only twice that the Capas rob a plantacion. For long time they stay back in the mountains."

At this juncture Topa suddenly interposed to Green in Quichua with "Ask him if he has ever heard of Villac Remaca?"

"Si; I have heard he was very rich, and that he died." The Chilean's reply to the question

was polite, but not interested. He sent a slightly inquiring glance at the sailor.

"This fellow is not telling lies. He speaks truth. He is not a Capa. He must be what he says he is, for he is a simple man in some ways. We should be better off without him, but my Chief has asked him to go to the high mountain with us," the Inca mumbled somewhat glumly to Green who was standing beside him.

"Why should we be better off without him?" Green demanded quickly. "He seems to have some good emerald dope under that brown mane he is sporting. You say he is straight. What more do you want?"

"Something I cannot have," the Inca came back with gloomy mysteriousness.

"What's that?" the sailor quizzed half in jest.

"I cannot tell you now. Perhaps I will tell you some day. I must go and unload the mules." Topa turned quickly away and padded across the grassy oval. He was still laden with the coils of rope which he had been looping while his companions were talking to Roccos and examining the emerald.

Green watched him go, conscious of feeling a curious sense of bafflement at the Inca's mysterious attitude. The sailor had become, through world-wide travel, a good judge of character. Topa, however, was still a riddle to him.

It had been early afternoon when the adven-

turers had set out to cross the ridge. It was now verging on five o'clock and Ralph proposed an early supper and "a good old campfire talk-fest as soon as it gets dark."

"Our *amigo* from Chile has a quart of beans to spill," he announced buoyantly. "Isn't that right, Señor Roccos?"

"No, no. I have no beans; nothing. All I have to eat was in my saddle bags. They go with the mule. *Lo siento mucho* (I am very sorry)." The little man looked sadly apologetic.

A shout of laughter greeted the apology. Pedro Roccos was thereupon initiated into the mysteries of American slang.

"*Comprehendo* (I understand)," he nodded, flashing his white teeth in a wide, cheerful smile. *Si,* I can tell you mucho. It is good for you and good for me that we have met. But over there is danger; great danger. You hold the life of you in your own hands." He brought his hands together as though cradling something.

"You mean the danger of being murdered by these Capas?" Mr. Edwards said interrogatively.

"*Si.* But that is not the only danger. There are too many poisonous snakes on that mountain, vipers and bushmeisters. Besides there is something wrong on the mountain. I tried to find out what it was. I stay there for over two weeks, but I am afraid since my first night there.

Afraid of—I knew not what. Ah, it is good to see *los hombres* again!" he broke off with a glad sigh.

"It'll seem better yet to get outside of a good hot feed," Ralph assured. "Go and stretch out on that pile of ponchos over there and take a rest. You surely need it."

The Chilean protested a little. Ralph had his way, however, and the new addition to the outfit rested while the outfit turned to in the interest of supper-getting. Ralph and Green prepared an appetizing meal of corn beef hash, canned tomatoes, peas, sliced pineapple and coffee. Bret and Jimmy gathered the wood for a campfire and Mr. Edwards and Topa watered the stock and tied them about the oval so that the animals should be able to graze.

Though the Adventure Boys were impatient to hear whatever the Spaniard might have to relate about the debatable region for which they were bound, they restrained their curiosity until after the Chilean had rested and eaten a good supper. The crisp freshness of the air acted as a spur to appetite. The jewel hunters were ready to eat at any time except directly after a meal. They finished supper with nothing but an array of empty plates scattered upon the oilcloth.

Ralph lighted the campfire with the first deepening of dusk, and the little company of jewel prospectors gathered around it with

alacrity. The trailers had chosen a spot on which to build the fire a little back from the oval where the stock were grazing. It was located on another smaller open space and this particular bit of clearing was fenced in on two sides by thickets which thus partly screened it from observation.

Topa alone did not join the circle around the campfire. Instead, he padded about among the horses and the mules. Every now and then he left the oval on short mysterious trips of his own, reappearing after ten-minute absences, and each time from a different direction.

"Hey, there, you Inky!" Ralph sang out as he presently caught sight of Topa by the orange glow of the campfire. The Indian was just returning from one of his ten-minute trips into the darkness. "You must like yourself for company," he rallied the brown man in Spanish. "*Pronto;* get into the game."

"No. It is not for me. I have said I want nothing to do with seeking for the *esmeraldas.* I am the mule *hombre.* It is best I should tend to my business."

"Go tell that to the birds," scoffed Ralph. "Come on now. We've been waiting for you to join the gang before Señor Roccos spills that quart of beans."

"Hola, Topa. I want you here. Will you join us, please," Mr. Edwards called out with pleasant decision.

"*Si,* my Chief." Topa rather reluctantly approached the campfire and seated himself at the outer edge of the circle.

"I wish you to hear what Roccos says, Topa, because his account of the mountain and what has happened to him there may coincide in parts with some of the things you have told us about the lost cavern of emeralds," the jewel man explained.

"*Si,* my Chief." Topa bowed, his dark features impassive.

"Go ahead, Señor Roccos. We're crazy to hear your experiences on old Snowtop. It will give us a line on things," was Ralph's animated opinion.

"You are determined, then, Señor Edwards, to go to the high mountain?" Roccos questioned with eager anxiety.

"Yes. I have a general map of the mountain which a friend gave me who believed that there were emeralds in the banks of a stream which flows through a canyon of this mountain. By the way; he said this particular mountain had no name that he could discover. Has it a name, and do you know it?"

Roccos shook his head. "Never have I heard a name for it," he replied. "Perhaps the Indian may know one. He is the Inca and of noble blood, I believe. Once before I saw him. But not tending mules. I cannot remember now where it was." Roccos shot an interested

glance at the Inca whose own eyes were busy peering into the darkness at the left, beyond the radius of the firelight.

"Topa, do you know whether the high mountain has a name, or not?" Green inquired.

"Yes." The brown man immediately spoke a word in Quichua of at least ten syllables.

"Great Scott! Let's call it Snow Boy and save our breath," begged Jimmy.

"What does that sweet, easy little word mean, Topias?" Ralph demanded with a derisive grin.

"The Treasure of Death," came the sinister answer.

"Br-r-r-r! I ought to shiver, but I'm not even scared," laughed Ralph. "I'm all fed up on Capas, snakes and grouchy Inky gods. It's a peachy movie title, but it doesn't thrill me."

"Nor me; nor me," echoed Bret and Jimmy boyishly.

"You see how things are, Señor Roccos. Green and I are equally anxious to try our luck on that mountain. *And we're going to try it.* We have rifles and revolvers, and we shall use them at need for defense. We have a right to prospect there and we shall permit no one to drive us off without a struggle."

"The Capas are probably the real trouble shooters," began Green. "They may be——"

Came an odd whirring, swishing sound. The startled campers caught a glimpse of a descending streak. Something struck the ground noise-

lessly at Topa's left and within an inch of one of his hands.

"What in Sam Hill——" burst out Ralph.

"Here." Topa had plucked the object from the ground and was now offering it to Ralph. It was an arrow, long-shafted and tipped with a stone head that had been ground to razor sharpness. Wrapped around the shaft was a bit of white paper, secured with a narrow strip of mottled snake skin. From out of the darkness beyond the campfire had come an unmistakable sign of a real trouble shooter.

CHAPTER XI

HANDING IT BACK TO THE CAPAS

"SOME mountain jinx wants us to know he's around and busy," Ralph said sarcastically as he ripped away the strip of snake skin from the paper and pulled the paper away from the shaft of the arrow. He spread open the half sheet of tough white paper, smoothing out the creases. Then he held it forward in the light of the fire, scanning it sharply.

"What's doing? What is it? Read it," came in simultaneous impatience from his comrades who had noted instantly the scrawled black handwriting on the now unfolded piece of paper.

"Look at the skull and cross-bones!" Bret exclaimed as he leaned over Ralph's shoulder. "By jinks, it's signed 'Capas.' What do you think of that?"

"Listen to this." Ralph read out emphatically in Spanish: '*Americanos—Vayase. No venga a la montaña. La muerte aguarda a usted.* (Be gone. Do not come to the mountain. Death awaits you.)'" The sinister message was signed "Capas" in larger black characters.

Below the signature stood the menacing insignia, a black skull and cross-bones.

"They seem to have a line on us," Malcolm Edwards said grimly as the murmur attending the reading out of the Capas' hostile message to the gem hunters died away. "Let me take that paper, Ralph."

Ralph handed him the paper. He examined it shrewdly for a moment. "I believe this was shot over here by the same gang that tried to run off the ponies," was his quick conclusion. "The Capas may have been on our trail from the time we bought Remaca's stock of ponies at Cuzco."

"Maybe this fellow, Remaca, who died recently, was really a Capa. You said you'd heard he was one, Topa." Green glanced toward the Inca with questioning eyes.

"Yes, I have heard it," Topa answered in Quichua. He was not looking at Green as he spoke, but at Roccos, and with his frequent frown.

"If he was," Green went on, "his pals would probably be keen on grabbing his horses for themselves. Maybe they thought us an easy bunch to tackle. Maybe they think so still. Look out." Green laughed, but there was a distinctly ominous note in his laughter.

"Maybe they've got a few shock punches coming to them, too," Ralph predicted, his youthful features alive with contempt. "Betcha those

robbers think they'll scare us into taking a back trail for the valley. They're due to wake up."

"You saw Capas on the high mountain?" Topa shot the question at Pedro Roccos with abrupt suddenness.

"*Si, companero,*" the Spaniard affirmed. "Twice I saw them. One night I saw four Capas sitting around a fire, playing cards. They wore masks and black capes with only sandals on their feet. They did not know I had hid in the thicket and was watching them. Then I saw one of the Capas who chased me down the mountain. But I saw only his masked face. I heard him talk to his companero, but that one stayed behind the bushes so that I could not see him."

"How many Capas think you there may be on the mountain?" Topa continued the questioning with odd intentness.

"I do not know, companero. Once I saw a notice about the Capas pasted on the wall of a station. I read in it that there were nearly a hundred Capas. It offered a reward of one hundred libras for each Capa, dead or alive."

"*Gracias.*" Topa relapsed into moody silence. "I go to see if the ponies all right." After a moment or two he rose and left the campfire circle.

"By cheesecake, I'm going to shoot that blamed arrow back at the confounded old Capers the minute we strike the other side of the

ridge," Ralph vowed vengefully. "I'll rig up some kind of bow, and shoot a nice special delivery shaft at those robbers."

"It might be a good idea to let the Capas know we are not going to be intimidated by them," Mr. Edwards said judiciously. "Now, Señor Roccos, will you tell us about the cavern of emeralds. We are curious to hear of your great-grandfather's experience on the mountain."

"I tell you about it in English, so then you will understand better," Roccos began, his bright dark eyes roving about the now silently attentive circle of men. "When my great-grandfather was the young man a very old Inca tell him about the cavern of emeralds. This old man like my great-grandfather mucho. He show Manuel, my great-grandfather, a little leather box full of emeralds. He tell Manuel he found these *esmeraldas* in the banks of a little brook near the foot of the mountain. He say this brook very short. It flows in the middle of the bed of a little canyon, runs down over a rock, and is nothing more. He tell Manuel this is not the place where are the best esmeraldas. There is another river at the foot of the mountain. This river has thousands of emeralds in its banks and in the gravel bed of it. Once it flowed among the foothills where it could be seen. The Indian priests who lived before the Incas wanted to keep this river of esmeraldas

a secret, so they made it flow under the ground."

"How the mischief did they make it flow underground?" Ralph interposed. "I mean without spoiling their emerald patch."

Malcolm Edwards and Stanley Green were already exchanging significant glances. They could readily understand how such an enterprise might easily have been accomplished by either the Incas or their even more marvelous unknown predecessors.

"I know not how. Manuel knew not, either. I have asked him that. Anyway these Indians covered over the river of esmeraldas so none but they could find it. They kept it for a secret always. They had a way to go to the river for *esmeraldas* whenever they pleased."

"Who told the old Inca about it, I wonder?" Ralph smiled skeptically. "Betcha it was some guy who had heard about it from his granddaddy, and so on. That's the trouble with most treasure stories. They're too indefinite."

"Es verdad." The Chilean shrugged his shoulders and smiled. "But I believe in this caverne of esmeraldas. The old Inca was sure it was there, though he could not find it. He said there had been no earthquake on that mountain. So the caverne must be there still."

"Did the old Inca give Manuel the emerald you just showed us?"

"No, Manuel find this emerald in very queer

way. One day when he was in the foothills of this mountain he killed the large bushmeister. You know how poisonous this snake is. He thought, *bueno,* bury the head in the earth. So he dug the hole to put the snake's head in. Then he was surprised because the dirt fell into another hole he found under the one he had started. And he could see down into the hole as if he saw down into a *cisterna* (cistern). And he could hear the sound of running water.

"He tried to make the hole he had dug larger, but he had only a small mattock to dig with and all around the hole was rock. He could not dig away the rock, but he scraped away the gravel on the top of the rock. It was then he found the esmeralda I have shown you. He thought he could find more of the esmeraldas the next day, for it was too late in the afternoon to dig for them. He ate some food from his knapsack and laid down in his blanket in a little cave he found. In the night came a storm with heavy rain and wild wind. Trees fell, and the branches broke, and great rocks rolled down the mountain. Manuel was glad to have the cave to stay in.

"The next morning he tried to find the hole in the ground where he had dug up the esmeralda, but it was lost to him. The ground looked different because of the hard rain. *Ay de mi!* There were rocks and tree branches all over it. Never again did he find the hole in the ground

he could see into like a cistern, or hear water running. He was sad-hearted because he was poor, and he thought he had at last found the caverne of esmeraldas under the rocks. Perhaps he had, *Quien sabe* (Who knows)? Then he was married and had to work every day and had no more time to go to the mountain to hunt for the lost caverne. He told me I must try to find it as soon as I grew to be the young man. Well, I have no wife to keep me at home. I am free to hunt the *esmeraldas.*"

"So that's the story of the lost caverne," Green said, breaking the instant of silence which had followed the Chilean's recital. "By George, I'd say finding it would be like picking the proverbial needle out of the haystack."

"I guess so. If Manuel couldn't find the hole in the ground again, over night, how do you imagine we are going to find it after all these years?" Jimmy contended hopelessly.

"It does seem very unlikely," smiled Malcolm Edwards. "Do you believe in the story the Inca told your great-grandfather, Roccos?"

"*Si,* Señor Edwards. I have read often the history of Peru. The Incas and the Indians who lived first of all in Peru were very clever. You have seen the roads, the storehouses, the aqueducts, and *muchos cosas* (many things) besides, which they built. They could have built the rock roof over the little river to hide it from sight."

"True. In such case they must have had a rich prospect, and reasons of their own for hiding it. That was before the Spanish invasion by Pizarro. They would have been fully justified in hiding their emeralds from the Spanish who treated them so cruelly. You will pardon me saying so, Señor Roccos."

"*Es verdad* (it is true)," corroborated the man from Chile.

"What became of the old Inca's pocket case full of emeralds?" Bret wanted to know.

"*Ay, mi madre!* He was murdered in his own little house and the *esmeraldas* stolen from under his pillow. This was before the time of the Capas, too." Roccos's hands went up in tragic gesticulation. "There is not much good fortune in the *esmeraldas.*"

"Not those that reside in the dirt of the Treasure of Death," Green agreed with a touch of satire.

"We should tremble," Bret assured with easy carelessness. "Did you ever hear of the Shadow god of the Pool, Señor Roccos?" Mr. Edwards found himself vaguely disappointed in the Chilean's recital. The indefiniteness of the information concerning the cavern of emeralds was such as to make it practically worthless in the light of a prospect.

As he asked the question the jewel man was reminded of Topa who was lingering over among the mules. He had not returned to the

campfire, but was still poking about by himself in the darkness.

"No, I have never heard of it," replied the Chilean.

"Do you know where the Pool is?" persisted Mr. Edwards.

"No. I have been only on one side of the mountain. Manuel never spoke of this pool to me, either."

"Did he ever say anything to you of evil gods and spirits?" Mr. Edwards was smiling a little. "I find that the Peruvians are superstitious. We were warned not to go too near the mountains."

"There was nothing like that in the time of Manuel." Roccos spoke with reflective certainty. "My great-grandfather had no fear to go to the mountain alone."

"Then all this wild stuff that Topa has heard and repeated to us has probably originated with these Capas. They are the real menace over on the high mountain. This notice is the last word needed to prove it."

"Hey, Topa," Ralph suddenly signaled the Inca. He could barely make out the brown man stationed at the edge of the green oval. "Come and get into the game of hunt the Capers. I want to ask you something."

He waited, watching the tall, shadowy form of the Inca, half veiled by the darkness. Topa was standing just beyond the radius of the

orange-red light of the fire, motionless as a statue. At first sound of Ralph's call he did not move. The next instant, however, he turned and came slowly toward the firelight circle.

"What you want?" Topa had already learned to ask this particular question in English. He stared at Ralph, frowningly, but spoke with the tolerant air which he always accorded the youth.

"How far away from here could a fellow be and then shoot that arrow into the center of the camp?" Ralph demanded eagerly.

"Back in the dark, little way. The Capa who shoot this arrow knows very well how to shoot."

"He certainly whizzed it over here a-humming," Bret commented. "Glad it hit the ground instead of the gang."

"Could you make a bow for that arrow, Topa? I'd like to shoot a message back to that bandit trust over there. Only I guess you'd have to do the archery act," Ralph ended gayly.

"I could make the bow, but what use will it have? To-night a Capa saw our fire and knew where to shoot the arrow. When we are over on the mountain we shall not know where to shoot the arrow. It will fall into a thicket or drop down the mountain side. If you wish to send the Capas a message write it and I will wrap it around the arrow and set the arrow in

a certain place I know, where the Capas will find it."

"*How* do you know they'll find it?" Jimmy interrogated.

"They will find it," was the Inca's stolid prediction. He said no more for a moment. Then he added: "The Capas will kill you if they can."

"Amiable beggars, aren't they?" was Green's satiric rejoinder. A kind of united, displeased howl had arisen from the other three Adventure Boys.

"They need a brake put on 'em. I'll see what I can do." Ralph went over to where the outfit's packs were piled and rummaged in his own. He returned to the fire with a small portfolio containing note paper and a fountain pen. Reseating himself among his pals, he began to write, regardless of the joking sallies of Bret, Jimmy and Green.

Thus far Topa had said little to Roccos. Now he sat down beside the Chilean and began questioning him in Spanish. Most of his questions related to the Chilean's encounters with the Capas. The brown man also seemed interested in learning the extent of Roccos's travels over the high mountain.

"Señor Roccos has not heard before of the Shadow god of the Pool," Malcolm Edwards presently interposed, "nor of the Pool on the mountain."

"No." Roccos shook his bushy head in emphatic negative. "Never have I heard of it from Manuel, my great-grandfather. So he must never have found it, and never did the old Inca who showed him the *esmeraldas* tell him of a pool."

"And how died the old Inca?" Topa suddenly flashed the question at Roccos.

"He was murdered, *companero*. He lay face down on his cot with his neck broken. It was as limp as the neck of a dead chicken. Yet there was no bruise on his neck. But the leather pocket case full of *esmeraldas* was gone. It had been under his pillow.

"He died by the will of the Shadow god," was Topa's dark declaration, "because he had brought the accursed green stones from the mountain. He must have escaped the Shadow god on the mountain, but the Shadow god claimed him at last."

"You have seen the Shadow god? You know what he is like?" Roccos fixed his bright brown eyes upon Topa. "He must be an old one, this Shadow god." He gave a half incredulous laugh.

"No. I have not seen this god, but make no mistake. He still lives. The Pool I will show you before many days pass. It is the Shadow god's man-trap. One stands on the edge"—Topa struck his hands together sharply—"then —one is gone, deep under the black water that

whirls round and round. You had better keep away from the Pool."

"How old is the Shadow god supposed to be?" Mr. Edwards' tone was good-naturedly quizzical. "He must be a long way past the hundred mark. And why is he called the Shadow god?"

"Because only his shadow is seen on the surface of the Pool. Suppose a man stops at the edge of the Pool. He sees no one. Then, all in a minute comes a tall shadow. An invisible hand pushes that man into the Pool. Nevermore is he seen after the black water closes over him. This happened to a *companero* of mine. I saw it happen. He went to the edge of the Pool, but I stayed back from it. *Mi pobre amigo!*"

"Topa, I'm more than ever convinced that murderous man-power is behind this Pool mystery," Malcolm Edwards asserted with stress. "Unless there should be some strange natural phenomenon responsible for what you say has happened to those who have stood on the edge of the Pool."

"What is this strange thing you talk of then?" The brown man returned challengingly.

"Ask me that after I have seen the Pool and looked this death-trap over," was the jewel man's reply. "I intend to do it."

"Then go you not too near the edge, or you

will find death there. Dead men cast no shadows. So the Shadow god must be still alive. I have heard that men sometimes live to be over an hundred years in these mountains."

Topa was far from encouraging in his reception of Mr. Edwards' determined announcement concerning the treacherous Pool. Before the jewel man had opportunity to sound him further on the subject Ralph came breezing up full of the "hot shot" he had ready for the "Capers."

"Listen to this!" he commanded gleefully. "This will keep our little mountain bats busy." He read with derisive emphasis:

"'*Cuidado. Vayese* yourself. *Fuera de aqui* (Take care. Chase yourself. Get out). We shan't miss you—that is, with a bullet if you start any monkey business. Mind your own business, or watch yourselves getting zipped off the mountain. We just can't stand you goofs. Get it straight and think it over. Americanos.'"

CHAPTER XII

THE INTRUDER OF THE NIGHT

A SHOUT of laughter greeted Ralph's slangy message to the Capas. It was followed by approving "Rah, rahs."

"Nothing is the matter with that straight steer," Ralph grinned his satisfaction at his own pithy effort. "It'll get across with that bunch of bandits. Never doubt it."

"It's a straight message of defiance, but it is best, I believe, to let these Capas understand, first and last, that we are not afraid of them," was his father's sturdy opinion.

"They'll not start anything to-night," Green predicted. "They'll watch and wait until they see what we are going to do. They'll probably have a nice little reception arranged for us over on the mountain."

"I wonder if they're good shots?" Jimmy said meditatively. "Would they come at us with guns, or with knives?" He directed the question to Green, asking him to repeat it to Topa in Quichua.

"All bandits carry knives," Topa informed Jimmy through the medium of Green.

"Guns——" He paused and shrugged his shoulders. "I think some Capas have guns; some have none. When Capas have raided the plantacions they made no noise. Sometimes strangle, sometimes knife the peons and the mæstros. You see for yourself one Capa tried steal the rifles. That look as if he want mucho."

"He got away with my rifle, confound it. He didn't want it any harder than I do now, either," Jimmy grumbled ruefully. "By George, if I happen to catch sight of him with it, over on old Snowboy, he'll figure in a losing game of Grab."

For an hour or more the adventurers continued to sit around the campfire discussing the Capas' sinister message and planning their own course of action when they should reach the enemy's territory. They were inclined to believe their journey across the ridge in the morning would prove uneventful. Immediately they set foot on the mountain they might be attacked by the black-cloaked, masked denizens of old Snowboy. Malcolm Edwards thought, however, that the Capas were more likely to hold off until night and attack the outfit under cover of the darkness.

"We had best turn in early and be up and stirring before sunrise," he advised. "We can cook breakfast by the big camp flashlight and be loaded and ready to start by sun-up. By following that program we'll arrive on the

mountain long before noon. We'll have ample time to do some exploring and pick out a sheltered campsite. I wish we'd run against a good-sized cave. Where there have been pre-historic mountain dwellers there should be plenty of caves. According to Roccos's great-grandfather there were no earthquakes on Snowboy in either his time or the time of the Inca who was murdered for his emeralds."

Topa had been listening intently to Mr. Edwards. Apparently he had understood the first three or four sentences spoken by the jewel man. He appealed to Green to translate the rest of the jewel man's talk to him.

"There are no caves at the middle of the mountain," he made discouraging comment. "Perhaps the Capas have one high up on the mountain. I have heard this said. You had better let me be on guard to-night, my Chief. I shall know more quickly than any of you if a Capa comes near."

Listening, Green smiled faintly. He was very sure Topa would know.

"Very good. I was going to take the detail myself with Green. You may have it if you like," Mr. Edwards said amiably.

"I like." The brown man's positive tone settled the matter.

Ten o'clock saw the outfit rolling up in their blankets glad of the warmth of them in the high mountain altitude. Topa had, at his own re-

quest, been given the first watch of the night which would be up at half-past two in the morning. Green was to take the second watch, lasting until half an hour before dawn, when he was to arouse the rest of the outfit for breakfast.

Shortly before Topa's watch had ended Stanley Green awakened and lay looking from the tent opening into the darkness. Always a light sleeper, he had opened his eyes with the drowsy impression of having heard the sound of men's voices. A glance at the illuminated dial of his wrist watch showed him the time. The hands stood at five minutes past two.

He was about to close his eyes and doze off to sleep again when the sound, which had registered upon his sleeping brain and wakened him, came again. He listened, with alert ears, broad awake now. Soon it came again—the deep undertones of a man's voice, pitched so low as to be not more than a vocal murmur.

Very quietly Green sat up in his blanket and began to take quick inventory of the blanketed forms of his comrades. With the exception of Topa, they were all there, even to the new addition, Roccos. His instant supposition had been that one of the outfit had awakened, risen and gone out to where Topa was on guard. He abandoned that idea after one sweeping survey of the sleeping men.

Noiselessly he slipped from his blanket and

rose to his feet. He had been sleeping nearest the tent opening, and, at the left of it. It was only a second before he was outside the tent, having successfully accomplished the ticklish feat of leaving the tent without waking the others.

When a few feet away from the tent Green halted, his ears trained to pick up again the sound he had lately heard. The last quarter of the moon had dwindled to nothing. The only light from the dark-streaked night sky glimmered faintly from a few pale stars. It was so dark Green could barely make out the ponies and mules as blacker blots against the black frame of the night.

Suddenly, after a brief hushed interval, he heard the deep indistinct murmur once more. He located it this time. It proceeded from a dense bushy growth at the right of the oval, mingling its murmur with the complaining trickle of the camp spring situated only a short distance beyond it. It was due to the sailor's remarkably acute sense of hearing that he had distinguished the sound of voices from the discontented gurgling of the spring.

A moment of further strained listening and the sailor dropped to the ground and began working his way, snake-fashion, across the narrowest part of the oval. Since the owners of the guarded voices were completely screened from view by the thicket he was confident they

could not make him out as he slid rapidly over the ground.

The point for which he headed was a ragged clump of low bushes which adjoined the thicket from whence emanated the carefully guarded voices. Reaching the clump, Green slipped into it with a lithe, sliding wriggle which he had learned to perform from watching the movements of large serpents in his naturalist days. Fortunately for him, the Adventure Boys had cleared the area immediate to camp of brushwood for the campfire. No snapping bit of brush, or crackling of dry twigs warned the men in the thicket of his nearness.

Coming to the edge of the thicket he slid cautiously into it, then lay still, every faculty on the alert. He was not more than a dozen feet away from two tall indistinct figures which he could barely outline among the thick growth of bushes and saplings. He continued to lie motionless until he was convinced that his presence in the thicket was as yet unsuspected by Topa and his night visitor. Green was confident that Topa was one of the pair. The Inca had not been at his post when the sailor had first come from the tent. His early suspicion of the Inca rushed over him again. He had suspected Topa of having a double game to play at the time the Indian had so suddenly reconsidered his refusal to join the jewel prospectors. Later, Topa's apparent desire to be loyal to the outfit had

worn down his initial doubtful opinion of the Indian. Now it returned to him with added force. Could it be that Topa was in any sense in league with the Capas?

Now that he had managed to come within a few feet of the shadowy pair, Green suddenly realized that eavesdropping was the last thing he cared to do, even in the interest of the outfit. In the same moment he heard Topa say in stern undertones "Tell your accursed maestro he had best stay in his cave and let the Americanos alone. I have given them the charms to protect them. You are a fool to wear the murder capa and kill for this demon thing of the rocks. Your reward will be the Shadow god and the Pool when he is done with you."

"Sh-h-h," came the warning answer. "You know not if he is far or near. I am sorry now that I chose this life. But it is too late. He would never let me go from this robber life I lead."

"I am not afraid of him." The Inca's reply was full of bitter contempt. "You are a fool to be afraid. You can go back to the plantacion. I will give you half of it for your own."

"*Ay mi madre!* I should only be murdered there by him," sighed the Inca's secret visitor.

"Better die honest on the plantacion than later be cast into the Pool," was Topa's grim retort.

The sailor had heard enough by this time to

warrant his further listening. He was in possession of at least three facts, more or less amazing. Topa was truly loyal to the outfit. He had a friend or relative who was wholly in the toils of the Capas. There was evidently some one at the head of the robber band whom Topa regarded as a human monster.

Came a silence between the Inca and his companion. Green lingered in breathless expectation of what might come next.

"If he finds out the Americanos have the charms he will be crazy to capture these fellows and give them to the Pool," was the ominous prediction. "Already we have been told to capture them, one at a time. You know I would not do this to these men, if I could, because they are your friends. Reboza tried hard to kill the one that night in the courtyard with the rifle."

"Yes, and if I had been a moment or two sooner, Reboza would have gone to jail instead of back to the mountain," was Topa's stern retort. "Tell Dozo, the evil thing I hate most, that the Americanos are good shots. They are not killers. They will shoot only to protect their lives. They have come to seek the emeralds, and they know how to find them. Dozo had better mind his own affairs and let them alone. If it were not for you I would lead a band of police against the Capas and capture them all. Perhaps I may ask the Americanos to help me do this."

"The police would not come to the mountain because it has the bad name," was the displeased reply. "Let well enough alone. I have been good enough to come and warn you about your friends, the Americanos. Now you talk of bringing the police against me."

"You know I should make an escape for you, if I were to send the police against the Capas. But make no mistake. My Chief, the Señor Eduardes, will rid the mountain of Capas, if he once puts his hand to it. He is a great man, and knows how to fight for his rights. So do his *companeros,* and his son."

"I know this. Reboza knows it, too. It was Reboza who shot the arrow. We saw the Americanos read the message. They laughed at it. Dozo will be in a rage when Reboza tells him this."

"They have written a message. It will be wrapped around the arrow and the arrow will be standing up in the mud at one side of the water hole near the ridge. Now you must go. It is soon time for the one named Green to be awake and on the watch. He speaks many tongues and is more clever than all of them in some ways. They are not easy to fool. Now has come the one, Roccos. What ails Reboza that he must do nothing but try to kill?" Topa demanded sternly.

"Dozo sent him after the one, Roccos, to kill him. Radeva was with him, but it was Reboza

who tried to push Roccos off the ridge. You are right about that."

"At first I thought his story was a lie, and that Dozo had sent him as a spy. Then I saw he was an honest fellow, and brave. Tell Dozo he is going back with the Americanos to the mountain to find the lost *caverne.*" Topa laughed softly.

"If I were to tell Dozo that he would throw a knife at my head," the other man said with a touch of mockery.

"Tell Dozo nothing, Yupani. Keep far from him. Why will you not leave that life?" There was actual anxiety in Topa's question. "Now you must go," he said. "Do not hunt for me again in daylight. You nearly made the trouble for me by standing on the rock the other morning in your blanket. I was not there, and the young Americano, Ralph, thought I was."

"I remember what you say. Worry not too much over me, Paullo. *Adios.*" Silently as a wraith the indistinct shape became blotted out in the darkness.

Turning, Topa hurried noiselessly back to his post. Green consulted his watch. He had five minutes to spare. He employed them in making a cat-foot journey back to the tent. He gained it without having been observed by the Inca muleteer. The latter was standing near the tethered row of ponies when Green came sauntering out of the tent. He had not yet been able

to make up his mind what to do as a result of having heard the interview between Topa and a Capa.

"Anything stirring," Green tried to make his eyes behave impersonally.

"The leaves on the trees stir always," the Indian made evasive answer.

"How about the Capas? I see the ponies and mules are still here." Green decided to give Topa a chance to tell him of his recent visitor.

"The Capas will not come here," said the Inca briefly. "I will stay on watch with you. I have no mind to sleep."

"All right. I'm going to patrol the camp." Green wheeled and walked away from Topa, signally annoyed by the brown man's secrecy. What he had overheard between Topa and the man, Yupani, was sufficient to inform him that Yupani was a Capa. Topa, it seemed, knew the ways of the Capas well enough to be one. Nevertheless, he was not. Instead he was opposed to the robber band.

Green was briefly in a quandary. What ought he to do in the matter? Loyalty to the outfit demanded that he should appraise his friends of anything that might be hurtful to their interests. What he had overheard, however, convinced him of Topa's loyalty to the outfit. Undoubtedly, Topa had a difficult problem of his own to solve in which the man, Yupani, figured. Since there seemed no likelihood of disaster to

the jewel hunters as a result of Topa's secret visitor, Green decided he had no right to "mix up" in the Inca's personal affairs. He would, for the present, keep the brown man's secret.

CHAPTER XIII

THE PENALTY OF BEING A JEWEL HUNTER

BEFORE ten o'clock that morning the outfit had landed triumphantly on a wide projecting ledge of old Snowboy, not quite half way up the mountain. They had crossed the narrow ridge between the two mountains, half expecting to be fired upon by a hidden foe. No hostile demonstration had accompanied their journey across the ridge. The adventurers believed themselves to be under the sharp surveillance of the Capas, nevertheless.

They chose a broad ledge of the mountain to the east of the ridge as a camping site until they should have become more familiar with their new surroundings. The ledge ended in a dizzying drop to the valley far below, indenting the mountain deeply enough to form the floor of an open shallow cavern with a natural rocky roof.

The Adventure Boys hailed the cavern with exuberant cheers. It meant a fairly snug shelter in storm. Nor could they be attacked from the rear by bandits. With their backs to the rocky wall of the little cave they could hold off

an enemy indefinitely to the enemy's disaster. The ledge was perhaps thirty feet wide and no one could gain it without being seen by those upon it.

"How about the campfire to-night? Think it might show us off too plainly to the Capers?" Ralph inquired of his father.

"We'll do without one for two or three nights," his father answered. "We're better off in the dark."

"Oh, shucks! Here's where the blamed Caper bats get one in on us," Ralph grumbled. "Who's afraid of them? Just think how daisy a big blaze would look on this old rock pile. I was going to build a regular humdinger. Have a heart, Dad! Those bats won't try a rush."

"Have some sense, Boy. I'm not crazy to get pinged, winged—porous," Stanley Green argued whimsically.

"Nor I," Malcolm Edwards shook a prudent head. "How many Capas do you believe there are, Topa?" He next addressed the Inca. "Have you ever heard any estimate given regarding the strength of their band?"

Green listened curiously for Topa's reply. He had once asked the muleteer the same question and been "turned down cold."

Topa lifted inscrutable dark eyes from the mule's harness he was engaged in repairing. With their objective reached the rest of the outfit had industriously turned to and assisted

the Indian in the unloading of the mules. That strenuous task had been followed by lunch which the adventurers had welcomed ravenously. After lunch they had overhauled their packs for the first time in a week.

The dropping of the late afternoon sun saw the workers at leisure. The packs had been stacked at one end of the partial shelter formed by the outcropping contour of the rocks overhead and their owners had disposed themselves at ease under the natural roof to rest after their long day of constant activity. Topa was the only one of the outfit to be still occupied with a task.

"Once it was said there were more than a hundred Capas," he answered after a long moment of seeming consideration of the question. "That was in my father's time. Many of those Capas must be dead now. I have heard there are not more than fifty or sixty Capas now. Not all of them are in the mountain at the same time, either. Some spend their robber's gold in the cities. Some are in the cities to rob the rich men's house. Then there are others who go away from the mountain for weeks at a time to attack the rich señors on the road and to rob their plantacions."

"Would you say they were five to one against us, Topa?" Green asked the Inca in a level tone, his eyes riveted upon the brown man's stoical features.

"It may be so," was the Indian's vague reply. "We shall know this before long," he added with gloomy prediction.

"There'll be some crimp put in that five-to-one proposition if they try to rush us here," was Ralph's vengeful threat. "They don't own the mountain. We've a whole lot more right here than they have. We're straight fellows, going about our own business. They're killers. Just because they sent us word to vamoose is no sign we are going to beat it. *No, siree.*"

"That's something we'll probably have to tell to them through the guns," was Green's grim response.

"Well, there's a price on the head of every Capa in the gang, offered by the Peruvian government. We'll be justified in defending ourselves with our guns, even if we should have to pop over a few of these cut-throats," Ralph argued.

"I'm not keen on shooting even these outlaws and I don't like the idea of you boys doing it, either," Malcolm Edwards said seriously. "If it should come to it, shoot to disable, rather than kill. In a fight we must stand shoulder to shoulder against them."

"Either that, or else we're dead ones. There's no mercy in a bandit. Lose against him —you're done. We can afford to be nothing but the winners in a gun scrap against this bunch of murder bats. With this rock pile at

our backs we're ready to give them a hot send-off." Green's eyes roved approvingly up and down the protecting rocky wall behind the camp.

"This is pretty good place to stay for a few days," Topa now hurriedly interposed in Spanish. "I understand a little of what you have said to my Chief in English." He added the explanation.

"What do you think the Capas will do, Topa?" Green put the pointed question to the Inca, his own features soberly impassive. He was concerned to know how Topa might answer it.

"Before long will come here; try to get the mules and guns and ponies, and capture us," was the brown man's prompt response. "Perhaps twenty or thirty Capas will come here. Then we shall teach them a lesson." He spoke with an odd kind of assurance that was flattering to the pride of the Adventure Boys.

"We win." Ralph twirled a purposeful arm about his head.

"Betcha we do," came in the same breath from Jimmy and Bret.

"They'll need some new capas when we get through with them," Ralph prophesied forcefully.

"Why should they be keen on capturing us, rather than killing us?" Green again questioned the Inca.

"Because they wish to learn why you Ameri-

canos are here on the mountain. Remember what I say. If any of you should be captured by the Capas tell nothing about the *esmeraldas*. They might promise you your freedom if you would tell them, but they would listen, and then kill you. And they might kill you if you refused to tell them." Topa made a gesture of futility.

"A lovely prospect," Bret declared cheerfully.

"You know this is true." Topa appealed to Roccos for corroboration. The Chilean was engaged in industriously poring over the diagram of the mountain which had been drawn for Mr. Edwards by his explorer friend.

"*Si, companero,*" the little man made ready answer. "The Capas kept out of my sight until they saw I was prospecting for the *esmeraldas*. After that they began to trail me. Perhaps they were afraid I might find some good stones and then go back to the valley and show the people there what I had found. Perhaps they believed I was an officer of the government's secret police. I know not. But it is true that the Capas are killers."

"It's hard to decide our course until these fellows have made another move against us. That's the penalty a jewel hunter has to pay," Mr. Edwards gave a short laugh. "A jewel man has to brave not only the wilds, but also the outlaws who hide in them. Well, fore-

warned is forearmed. We'll stay here for the present and hold our own against these killers."

"Oh, confound the blamed old Capers! You wouldn't let 'em run us off the mountain, would you, Dad?" Ralph demanded in alarmed vexation.

"It would be the first time such a thing had happened to me on a gem hunt. We'll not leave here before we are ready unless odds against us should prove overwhelming. We could not stand out long against a large band of Capas. Then you must consider, too, that we should have no freedom to prospect. We should only be risking life and wasting time. I'd be disappointed. I think we are on good prospecting ground, too," Edwards ended with a sigh.

"We're here. That's half the battle," Jimmy encouraged. "Give those Caper bats a few rounds of cold lead and——"

His voice was abruptly drowned in a dull, roaring sound like the roll of distant thunder. The noise grew louder, and still louder. Came a terrific crash over the heads of the group of men lounging under the rocky roof of the shallow cavern. Simultaneous with the crash a jagged piece of rock the size of a large packing box bounded off the shielding roof and struck almost in the middle of the ledge. The Capas had been prompt in making their next move against the Adventure Boys.

CHAPTER XIV

UNDER COVER OF DARKNESS

A DEAD silence followed the thunderous descent of the huge rock upon the camp ledge. The shock of the unexpected had temporarily robbed the adventurers of speech.

"Just like that!" Ralph broke the silence by exclaiming with a rather strained laugh. "It wasn't the Capers' fault that the roof didn't cave."

"Gee whiz! They got into action, pronto, I'll say." Green walked boldly out on the ledge, revolver at ready. He intended to fire at the first glimpse he might catch of a Capa. His eyes swept the ragged, rock-strewn height above the ledge, sparsely grown with stunted trees and sprawling bushes. A glance showed him half a dozen or more large rocks which malicious man-power might easily send hurtling down upon the protecting, outcropping rock.

"We've got to get out of here," he announced in a low tone as he returned to the group watching him. "We forgot to figure on the rock-shooting game. There's a bunch of big rocks above the ledge. The next one that hits

this rock roof over us will smash it. I move that we move now. Pronto; right away."

"That's strenuous advice, Green. You'll have to show the wisdom of it to me." Malcolm Edwards was looking at the sailor as though doubtful of the latter's ability to do so. "We need daylight for a new move."

"We can beat it from here after dark and get away with it by doing the one thing we need most to do—head down instead of up the mountain." The sailor paused to await the effect of his suggestion.

"I can lead you down the mountain, Señor Ed-uards," broke in Roccos eagerly. "I know well the way."

"It is also known to me," Topa now joined in the conversation. "I said this was a pretty good place, but I have changed my mind. Let us make ready, and go, my Chief," he proposed almost pleadingly. "Let Roccos lead the way. I will be behind the mules watching all the way down to see if we are followed. I do not believe we shall be. Perhaps the Capas may not know when we go away from here. It will be very dark, for there is no moon." Topa had suddenly become eager to pull up stakes and move.

"I don't see how they can fail to hear us getting under way," argued the jewel man, not yet convinced of the wisdom of the contemplated move.

"Perhaps it was only one or two Capas who

spied upon us and rolled down the rock," Topa returned with a curiously patient inflection which Green alone caught and understood. "Perhaps they have gone away now."

The sailor wondered what Topa would say if he were to turn to the Inca with: "Yes, there were only two, and their names are Reboza and Yupani. I daresay you know whether they have gone away from here or not." Green held his peace. So long as Topa continued to stand by the outfit, the sailor was resolved not to "mess into" the brown man's personal affairs.

"See here, Dad," Ralph began with some excitement, "Roccos has told us that the cavern of emeralds is, supposedly, at the foot of this mountain. Of course, that's not much of a prospect. Still, I couldn't call the emerald dope that Proffy Judson gave you a specially definite prospect, either. He didn't have even one green shiner to show for his theory that these mountains held emeralds. We've seen the peach of an emerald that Manuel found down in the foothills of this mountain. Maybe, too, if we move out of here to-night the Capas will think they've chased us and so let us alone for a while."

"What do you and Jimmy want to do, Bret? The rest of the crowd has been heard from." Mr. Edwards looked inquiringly from Bret to Jimmy.

"The emerald cavern sounds good to me.

I'd like to dig up *esmeraldas* in bunches," was Bret's twinkling view of the matter.

"We can't stay here, and we've got to go somewhere," Jimmy pointed out with his usual bluntness of opinion. "You know the old saying: 'Where there's much smoke, there's usually a fire.' Maybe out of all this dope about the cavern of emeralds there is some truth. It would be good sport to hunt for the cavern, anyway." At heart Jimmy had already dreamed of the Adventure Boys as having found the emerald cavern. Jewel hunting was still to him in the nature of a fairy-tale adventure.

"All right, campaneros," Mr. Edwards said with tolerant decision. "The die is cast. Down the mountain we go—to-night. It will be light for the next three hours. We shall have ample time to cook and eat supper and reload the mules. We'll leave the reloading until as late as we can before twilight sets in. We'll start down the mountain as soon as it is dark. Roccos can head the procession. I wish you would stay behind here on the ledge for a few minutes after we've started, Topa. We've plenty of wood here for a campfire. What I wish you to do is light it as soon as we're well away from the ledge. We may be able to fool these bandits into believing that we are still here."

"I will do this, my Chief," Topa promised. "When we have come to the foot of the mountain I will show you something that will be good

for you. No one but myself knows of it. When I have shown you, you will understand that I am your *amigo,*" he ended very earnestly.

"We don't need to be shown, Topa. We believe you are our friend," Mr. Edwards assured.

"You believe this, too, Señor Green?" Topa leveled dark, solemn eyes upon Stanley Green.

"Yes, Topa. I'll say you're square." There was unspoken question, however, in Green's reply.

Topa continued to regard the sailor intently. "*Gracias,* Señor Green," he said, then turned abruptly away and went over to where the packs were stacked.

Once the outfit had decided to move they went energetically about their preparations for the trip down the mountain to be made under cover of the darkness. Since they had plenty of time, Ralph had advocated having a "bang-up feed" to "stay by" them on their all-night journey. He boiled potatoes, made biscuits, opened canned salmon and peas, and "trotted out" canned peaches and a fruit cake which he had been saving for a special occasion. He and Jimmy prepared the feast, permitting Bret to make the coffee under their teasing direction.

"Come and get it, and be glad it's some spiffy chuck," Ralph forcefully impressed upon his comrades as he sent out the supper call in judicially subdued tones.

"You'll not eat another like it for a while. There's only one fruit cake, and that's for supper. Dig into it while the digging's good," Jimmy added pertinently to Ralph's supper call.

With supper out of the way before dark, the mules were reloaded as soon as twilight began to gather. Darkness saw the last preparation for the move completed and the riders ready to mount their ponies and be gone from the ledge.

Malcolm Edwards had offered Roccos the use of his pony in leading the van down the mountain, declaring he would ride one of the mules. The Chilean had refused the offer, preferring to keep ahead of the procession of riders on foot.

At length the slow descending darkness of the high mountain altitude deepened to the greater dusk of evening. Quickly and with little noise, the formation for the journey down the mountain began. As each rider swung into line, he moved on down the trail behind Roccos, who headed the formation by fifteen feet. Behind him came Malcolm Edwards, then Jimmy, Bret and Ralph, respectively. Green's pony followed the mules. The sailor had chosen to be next to the last man in order to keep an eye upon Paullo Topa.

He did not doubt the brown man's integrity. In fact, he believed in Topa more strongly than before. Topa had shown real anxiety in advising Edwards to make the move down the moun-

tain. What Green wished to discover was whether or not the outfit would make its get-away without being dogged by Capas. If there should be Capas in the offing on that hurried night journey, the sailor concluded that Paullo Topa would be the first to know it. The brown man's behavior on the night expedition would soon tell the story. Green was confident that, in case the outfit were to be trailed by the bandits, Yupani and Reboza, Topa would linger far enough behind the cavalcade to "have it out" with the two Capas.

Topa, however, did not show any sign, as the careful down-trail journey continued, of being specially on watch for any one or anything. A few rods below the now deserted ledge, and at the end of a steep, stony descent, the riders had come upon a section of a ruined Inca road, wide enough to accommodate two horsemen, riding side by side. Thus Green could make out the brown man's movements distinctly as Topa walked beside the sailor's pony. For the most part the Inca kept his face straight ahead, though he cast an occasional glance at one side or the other of the trail.

The Indian had lingered on the ledge after the others had taken the trail in order to touch a match to the already prepared fuel for a camp-fire. Remaining on the mesa only long enough to ascertain that the fire he had kindled had begun to take hold and burn, he had bounded

springily down the rocky path after the riders. He had soon overtaken Green, who was riding along at a slow jog behind the mules. In the dark the riders had wisely left the picking of the mountain descent to the sure little feet of their ponies.

"The fire burns," was the Inca's guarded salutation as he resumed his walk beside the sailor. "Soon we shall come to a place on the road where we can see it. I built it on the edge of the rocks. So it can throw not much light under the stone roof. Who, then, can tell if we are there, or not?"

"Any one could who happened to be hanging around the ledge when we made our get-away," Green differed impatiently.

"But there was no one there," Topa came back with certain tranquillity.

"How do you know there wasn't? See here, Topa, what do you know about this Capa business that we don't, but that we ought to know?" Green burst out in sudden subdued accusation.

"I cannot tell you now, Señor Green. Perhaps I will tell you some day." Topa's words were full of obstinate decision. "Believe me to be your friend. I wish to help you Americanos. Only you should not have come here. You know I have warned you."

"Oh, shucks! We've a right to go where we please. What's the matter with you, Topa?"

Green's voice became sharply stern. "Are you a Capa?"

"No, Señor Green. I am not a Capa. You should believe I am not a bandit. Why do you accuse me of being one? I have given you the pledges of the golden condor which were my father's. Are they not proof of my good heart toward the Americanos?" There was a dignified, reproachful appeal in the Inca's defense which "got" Green.

"Are you——" he began.

"Ask me not anything more, Señor Green," Topa broke in with subdued vehemence. "Believe only that I am a faithful fellow of mules. Believe that I am the friend of the Americanos. I will let no danger come near you, can I but warn you."

"Is that a promise?" Green asked shortly. He felt that he was somehow in the wrong about Topa, but he hated to give in. Topa had yet to explain satisfactorily his secret connection with the Capas.

"*Si, amigo.* I give it to you as a promise." Something in the Inca's melancholy inflection touched the sailor.

"Beg your pardon, Topa," he said.

"*Nada.*" Topa dismissed the apology with grave courtesy.

A strained silence fell upon the two as they traveled on. Green was vexed with himself for having shown open suspicion of Topa. Still,

he wondered how Topa happened to know there were no Capas near the ledge. Perhaps Topa had stolen away to a second secret meeting in the thicket with the man, Yupani. This might account for the Inca's urgent appeal to Malcolm Edwards to break camp on the ledge and trail down the mountainside.

The direct descent of the mountain to the low-lying foothills was not more than a distance of a mile and a quarter, could a plumb line have been dropped from the ledge to the lowest of the foothills. Such a descent was impossible of accomplishment, owing to lack of trails, precipitous drops, deep canyons and impassable rock barriers. The trail the outfit was obliged to follow as their only choice made a wide circuitous sweep around the mountain in the descent, thereby increasing the distance to be traveled as a matter of between six and seven miles.

Night traveling at no faster rate than the steady clip-clop of the mules kept the outfit on the trail until shortly after three o'clock in the morning when the weary cavalcade came thankfully at last to a small belt of tall, singing pines which crowned one of the lowest-lying of the foothills. Under the tall straight trunks of the sentinel pines the ground was surprisingly clear of brush and aromatically thick with fallen pine cones and needles. It promised the weary wanderers a pleasant, fragrant bed.

Arrived at the grove of pines, it did not take the wayfarers long to tether the mules and ponies to the smaller trees and open their blanket rolls, preparatory to turning-in for a much needed rest.

"I will take the watch till sun-up, my Chief, if you say," Topa earnestly importuned Malcolm Edwards. "When comes the light I will show you something."

"You're a good scout. For once I'm too sleepy to chew with you about standing watch myself." Ralph, lounging next to Topa, gave the Inca a friendly whack on the back. "I just don't want to be it."

"Same here, Topa. You're it by your own election." Green made his tone purposely more friendly than usual. He wished Topa to understand that he did not disbelieve in him.

"*Gracias.*" Topa included the group of men in the thank you. His dark eyes rested somberly, almost questioningly, upon Green. Silently he unslung his bright-hued serape from one shoulder, wrapped it about him and stalked off toward the edge of the pine grove. Before his tall form had won free of the little grove of sweet-scented pines the darkness of the predawn hour had enveloped him, blotting him from sight.

CHAPTER XV

THE DOOR IN THE CANYON WALL

IT was bright daylight and a warm golden sun was filling the morning sky with cheerful floods of yellow light when Topa reappeared to the outfit among the towering pines. Thoroughly exhausted, the weary travelers had just begun to awaken when the Inca came to call them.

"Gee whiz!" Ralph's eyes traveled in dismay to the pointing hands of his wrist watch. "It's way past nine o'clock. Some sleep! You must be good and ready to hit the hay, dear old Inky chum. Tell our Chocolate Bud what I said in Squeechy. Will you please, Green? I can't make my Español behave whenever I try to hand out Americano slang."

Topa allowed a smile to flicker briefly about the corners of his firm mouth at Ralph's funnily cheerful remarks. "No wish to sleep now. I will sleep to-night; very well. Now we had better hurry, make the breakfast." He glanced from Ralph to Green, saying rapidly in Quichua: "Tell my Chief that what I have to show him is quite a long way from here. It is a better

place to camp than this. In this place it is easy for bandits to come near, hide behind the trees and shoot us all."

Malcolm Edwards not only agreed with Topa's opinion of the pine grove. He was willing, even anxious, to go on to the spot on which the Inca seemed to be determined they should make camp. By ten o'clock the cavalcade was under way again and following a fairly well-defined trail which continued in and out among the foothills. It led at last into a canyon, the walls of which rose to a height of perhaps fifty feet and were so close together as to greatly shut out the light. Through this shadowy canyon the little procession went only to find that this canyon led into another, smaller, but opening more broadly at the top.

The bottom of this canyon was an arroyo with a thick scattering of small stones and gravel to show where once there appeared to have been a water course. It was not more than twenty feet wide from wall to wall. As they proceeded through it they made a sudden disappointing discovery.

"It's a *confounded blind alley!*" Ralph called out crossly. "Is *this* the best you can do, Inky Inca?" he yelled back at Topa who was just coming into sight with the mules from around the corner of the canyon. "We're going to end bank-up among the rocks in about five seconds."

Topa's white teeth flashed into amused evi-

dence. He waved his hand at Ralph, then left the mules and came running up beside Brownie.

"You wait," he declared mysteriously. "You will not believe until you see. Now we have come to the place I have told you is a good place to camp. Everything good is there. You see."

As they approached the masses of ragged high-piled rocks that marked the end of the short canyon, Topa said with a trace of satisfaction: "See, Señor Ralph. Over there is water and on the other side of the cascade is another little canyon full of grass and green bushes for the food of the horses and mules."

"Surest thing you know!" was Ralph's buoyant reply. "Show me something else on the lot," he added humorously in English.

"You come with me," Topa invited in Spanish, exactly as though he had understood Ralph, which he had not.

Ralph left his pony's back with a flying bounce that betokened his interest in the Inca's mysterious invitation. He followed the Indian's long strides across the rock-girt end of the canyon, eagerly watching the brown man's every movement. On the left-hand side of the canyon and within a dozen feet of the end Topa stopped. Ralph stopped beside him, his face full of impatient inquiry.

"Well, what comes next?" he demanded with his usual good-natured excitement.

"I will show you." Topa swung round and

faced the age-yellowed, smooth rocky side of the canyon. His long dark fingers began a swift, deft movement upon the right-hand side of the canyon wall. Ralph heard a sudden rushing sound. Next instant he was staring in round-eyed astonishment at an opening the size of an ordinary door, now gaping in what had seemed to be a wall of solid rock and into which Paullo Topa had disappeared.

"Hey, Topa! Where are you?" Ralph's voice had risen to an amazed shout. "That was some comer you just treated me to." Ralph dived through the newly-revealed opening in the rock, overcome with excited curiosity to learn how far back it went. From the opening he could not see Topa.

Immediately he had stepped over the threshold of the secret rocky door he saw the Inca standing several feet to his left in what seemed to be a large cavern. He could just make the brown man out through the imperfect light that shone in from the open doorway. So far as he could see there was not even the tiniest ray of light filtering into the cavern through a natural crack or gap in the roof. The big cave seemed to be one of Nature's own bits of architecture, adapted by prehistoric canyon dwellers to their own special needs.

His shouts to Topa had caught the attention of his comrades. They were dismounting from

the ponies while Ralph was accompanying Topa across the canyon floor.

"Why, where's Ralph?" Jimmy Stone yelled in lively surprise as he stared toward the rocky wall near which he had seen Ralph and Topa standing not more than two or three minutes previous. Besides, there was something different—Jimmy sent up a fresh burst of yells. He was positive he hadn't seen a hole in the side of the canyon before then. He was looking straight at one now; as large as a doorway. Ralph had disappeared and the doorway had appeared.

Jimmy and Bret headed a dash for the yawning opening, in what had seemed solid rock, in which the others joined. Ralph met them on the threshold, jubilantly waving his arms and calling out in stentorian tones: "Right this way, gentlemen, to see the greatest wonder of Inkyland. 'The Door in the Canyon Wall, or, How Did It Get That Way?' "

"Precisely what we'd all like to know," flung back Stanley Green. "I'd have said the wall was solid rock." He was examining the inside of the stone doorway as he spoke. "It's not so thick," he commented, "not more than six inches, I'll say." He snapped out a small measuring rule from an inside breast pocket of his coat and measured the thickness of the stone doorway. "Exactly six inches," he announced triumphantly.

"It is hard to tell how much of this cavern is due to Nature's handiwork and that of a prehistoric people," Mr. Edwards stated as he entered the cavern and flashed a light about it, then started at the left of the door and began an investigatory round of the cave. Green and Roccos joined him in the inspection, while Bret, Jimmy and Ralph centered their excited attention on an attempt to discover the mechanism controlling the door of rock which had disappeared before Ralph's eyes.

Paullo Topa stood close by the three young men, listening to their wondering exclamations with a grave smile. The trio were ambitious to discover the controlling mechanism without help from the Inca. There seemed small possibility of it.

"I give it up!" Ralph exclaimed disgustedly after half an hour of strenuous poking and prodding of the unyielding stone. "Catch me wearing out my fingers on that riddle. How the mischief did you get wise to it, Topa? You certainly can do the trick. I can't find a way to bring back the door, let alone opening it."

"I have known this secret door since I was the *muchacho* (boy) of fourteen," Topa replied. "One time I came to this canyon to hunt for the *esmeraldas*. I was alone, and hunted all day. Late in the afternoon I was very tired and sat down on the ground with my back against the canyon wall. Right here I sat." Topa

pointed to the middle of the open doorway. "I leaned back hard against the stone wall and then I felt the wall begin to move. This made me scared. I jumped up and yelled. Then I was more scared because I saw the hole in the rock. I knew not what had become of the rock. I thought it was enchanted. Then I saw there was a cave, and I made a torch and lighted it and went into the cave."

"So you've hunted emeralds, too!" Ralph cried triumphantly.

"Only when I was the *muchacho.*" Topa had related his story in Spanish. He now continued in that tongue with: "I worked very hard to try to find out how to bring back the door. I tried till dark. Then I ate some food from my knapsack and went into the cave and slept all night. I was not afraid of the Capas, for I knew they stayed high up on the mountain, and I was only a *muchacho.* The next day I tried all day to make the door come back."

The brown man gave a reminiscent sigh. "Ah-h-h!" he said. "At last my fingers found this." He bent down and pressed his capable brown fingers firmly against a spot on the canyon wall, low down and at the right of the puzzling doorway.

He had hardly taken his hand from the spot which harbored the secret mechanism when the rock commenced to fall. A faint shout went up from the three men within the cave as the stone

door dropped, making them prisoners temporarily. A moment and it rose again, to a voluble accompaniment of excited voices.

Half an hour more and the Adventure Boys' outfit to a man could work the secret mechanism controlling the door in the canyon wall. Topa had also showed them another interesting feature of the door. The mechanism could be worked from inside as well as from the outside. What principle of leverage it involved he could not explain. It was clearly a secret which had died with its clever creators. He doubted if removing the door itself from the opening would solve the problem.

Green and Malcolm Edwards finally came to the conclusion that what seemed to be the natural wall of the canyon in front was an artificial wall that had been matched with the natural canyon wall in order to cover the wide mouth of a cavern. Thus the smaller opening into the cave and the rock door had been planned and evolved by prehistoric man instead of Nature.

"This canyon I think is the best place for you to camp all the time," Topa told the jewel hunters through Green. They finally turned from the fascinating process of working the mechanism of the rock door, deciding they were hungry enough to enjoy lunch. "You go where you please in the daytime to seek the *esmeraldas*. But at night always come here. This cave is

large enough for all, and for the packs. It goes far back. Here you can keep the ponies and mules, too, if you want to go a little way on foot, or if Capas come. You can see no one can open the rock door but you."

"And you," Ralph merrily corrected the omission.

"*Si.*" The brown man nodded with a far-away look in his eyes, his expression sober almost to sadness. "I have said I would have nothing to do with seeking the *esmeraldas,*" he said. "Only I will tell you what I once heard. They are at the foot of the mountain, not at the middle or the top. But you will not find the cavern of *esmeraldas.* No one will ever find it." Topa again voiced his earlier adverse opinion.

"Topa, we'd all like you to know that we are grateful and thankful to you for bringing us here. You've certainly chosen a fine camping site for us. We could hold this place against a regiment of Capas." The jewel man shook hands warmly with the Inca. "Thank you for the information about the emeralds. You've made it possible for us to prospect for emeralds on this mountain. I hope you will change your mind and hunt stones with us."

"*Gracias.* I will think of what you have said, my Chief. Now I go to unload the mules."

Topa did not proceed to the job of mule-unloading until after he had been hemmed in by the adventurers and roundly cheered. Ralph

had furnished the impetus for the demonstration by means of secret signals. In their noisy exuberation the four Adventure Boys failed to note the fleeting flash of wistfulness that sprang to Topa's eyes during their vigorous outburst of good will.

"Where's Topa?" Ralph inquired generally that evening of the crowd around the oilcloth, hungrily beginning their supper.

A confused babble of answers ascended regarding Topa's whereabouts.

"Much obliged. I guess I know almost as much about where our Chocolate Caramel is as you do," Ralph returned humorously in sarcastic thanks.

"He was over there with the mules long after the unloading," Bret said. "He was going over their harnesses and fixing up some places in 'em that needed fixing. I didn't see him after that."

"Oh, he's spooking around here somewhere with that shadow glide of his. He could walk over an acre of dry brush and never crack a twig," Jimmy declared half enviously. "Young Zuni had nothing on Topa when it comes to shadow-footing it. Yet Topa's no sneak. He never comes slithering along like a confounded bushmeister under the leaves."

"Right-o, Mr. Stone. Guess we'd better save Inky his supper." Ralph transferred a goodly portion of bacon, beans, and fried potatoes to

the big camp frying pan and clapped down the lid.

"Inky" did not appear at the familiar oilcloth to claim his supper. Nor did the gradual fall of darkness bring him with it. Bret and Roccos were to take guard duty that night, Bret the first watch of the night; Roccos the last.

At nine o'clock Topa continued missing. Still the outfit had every reason to expect his return, probably before midnight. It had been decided that the adventurers should sleep in the cave, but with the rock doorway open and the guard posted just outside.

Half a dozen times during his watch Bret was deceived by night shadows drifting across the canyon into thinking he could pick up the brown man's tall form. He awakened Roccos with the sober news of Topa's non-return. The Chilean was of the cheering opinion that Topa could take care of himself, wherever he was. He had perhaps gone further away from the canyon than he had expected to go when he started out. Perhaps he had rolled up in his blanket for a nap at some point along the trail, and had gone fast asleep. He had had no sleep on the previous night. He would probably appear in the canyon with daylight.

But when dawn hung out its first lovely streamers of palest pink and snow and gray, Topa was still among the missing.

CHAPTER XVI

RUNNING WATER

"BY Jinks, it's queer about Topa! Where in Pete's name did he blow to? I'm going over and ask the mules. Maybe he told 'em where he was going."

Ralph left his comrades, grouped in front of the open cave door and concernedly discussing Topa's absence, and went racing down to the little side canyon where the mules and ponies were grazing. He was half hopeful of seeing the brown man appear from among the grazing animals. Topa had generally regulated his brief absences from camp to suit himself, and without consulting any of the adventurers.

Glancing eagerly about among the placid grass-eaters Ralph's attention became riveted upon something white. It topped a tree branch about five feet high which had been pounded firmly into the ground.

Ralph cleared the few yards between him and the tree branch in two or three bounds. He snatched the bit of white, flapping gently in the light breeze, from the knife slash in the tough wood that held it. It was a piece of white wrap-

ping paper and bore half a dozen lines in large black writing. They were:

" 'My Chief. I go, but you will yet hear well of me. You have a safe place in the cave, but guard yourself. Seek the *esmeraldas* if you like. There is one who seeks your life because you seek them. You will learn all when I return. Paullo Topa.' "

The note had been written in grammatical Spanish and was properly punctuated, revealing Topa as of better education than the majority of the Peruvians with whom the adventurers had met.

"Read that!" Ralph dashed back to his comrades with the Inca's message. *"Isn't that just like him?"* He thrust the paper into his father's hands. "He's been planning this fade-out. I noticed yesterday that he looked as if somebody'd got his goat."

Topa's unexpected message elicited a burst of surprised comment from the others as it went the round, with the exception of Stanley Green. The sailor instantly suspected Topa's absence to be connected more or less with the personal affairs of the man, Yupani. With Topa's promise of loyalty still fresh in his memory Green could not bring himself as yet to the point of revealing to his pals the little he knew of Topa's personal business.

Mr. Edwards shook his head over the message. "This comes of hiring a man of mystery

as a muleteer," he said with a half rueful smile. "Still, I can't complain that Topa has left me at the wrong time. He's done his level best for us. A fine fellow! I only hope no harm befalls him."

"He knows well something bad about this mountain that we don't know." Pedro Roccos, generally good-humoredly silent during the camp discussions, now offered an opinion. "I know, too, there is something bad to be afraid of up on the mountain. I felt afraid all the time. No afraid of the Capas, or that they want kill me. I don't know then about this Shadow god Topa tell of. Now I think maybe there is some mountain man, very cruel and terrible, who likes to catch men and kill them at the Pool. Maybe the terrible one watched me, but I don't see him. Only I felt afraid. I don't know. I can no 'splain." Roccos threw out his arms with an air of defeat.

"I'm convinced there is some inhuman trickster behind that Shadow Pool business," Green declared. "If we had nothing else to do it would be sport to go after it. As it is, we'd better begin digging in for emeralds. We've lost considerable time already. We only gave ourselves a certain time limit for this emerald hunt, you know."

"I move we begin prospecting this very day," was Ralph's lively proposal. "Oh, no. I forgot. I'm keen to see how far back this cave

goes. It looks as though there was quite a long passage at the back of it."

"It won't take long to do that. We can begin prospecting this afternoon," Jimmy amended. "I'm crazy to go to digging again for stones."

"Come on, then. No time like the present." Ralph started ahead into the cave, Bret and Jimmy at his heels. Green, Roccos and Mr. Edwards remained where they were, deep in discussion regarding a choice of the prospect they intended shortly to uncover.

Thus far none of the adventurers had investigated the narrowing passage at the back of the rocky room into which the cave gradually merged. The door of the cave had been practically sealed until their advent into the canyon of which it formed part of the wall. This fact precluded the possibility of the presence of intruders.

Picking up the camp flashlight from its accustomed place on one of the packs, Ralph threw on the light and advanced toward the passage. Bret and Jimmy followed him, their own pocket lights playing upon the rough stony floor and the still rougher-hewn rock roof. It barely missed the top of Ralph's head, he being the tallest of the trio.

"There's more to this passage than you'd believe at first glance." Ralph presently paused and directed his light straight ahead, peering sharply into the stream of illumination it cast.

"We've come at least a couple of hundred feet and the end of it's not in sight yet."

The three young explorers went on a few yards further. An explosive "Gee whiz!" from Ralph caused Bret and Jimmy to collide violently as they made a simultaneous dash forward, lights flashing.

"The end of the route!" Ralph ejaculated. "I hereby name it the Topa Terminal." He was busy throwing light into the dark corners of the cave into which the passage had merged. It was a smaller cave than the one at the other end of the passage and the floor was nothing but a succession of large flat uneven rocks. The roof of the cave slanted downward from left to right. It was at least two feet lower at the extreme right side of the cave than at the left. The three Adventure Boys had to duck in walking under it.

"Hark!" Jimmy suddenly held up a hand for silence. "I can hear water running."

"So can I," rose in chorus from Ralph and Jimmy after an instant of listening.

"It certainly isn't in here," Bret said conclusively after making a quick tour of the cave. "It sounds from——" He stopped in his searching prowl, uncertain from which direction the murmur of rushing water was coming. "From there." He finally pointed toward the lower right-hand side of the cave opposite which he was now standing.

"It's on the other side of this wall," Bret called out the announcement after he had hurried over to the right-hand wall of the cave and listened with his ear against it. "It sounds like a brook flowing along. Yes, sir, it is," he next excitedly confirmed his own guess. "I can hear it plainly now. This wall can't be solid rock, or I never could hear through it like that."

"It's running water, all right enough," Ralph was first to confirm Bret's conjecture. "Great guns! That's queer." Ralph's ejaculation held a degree of sheer wonder. "You fellows remember what Roccos told us about the old Inca telling Manuel that he had found a cave at the foot of the mountain; that when he was in it, he could hear the sound of water running, and——" Ralph paused impressively—"he believed it was the lost river in the lost cavern of emeralds."

"*Santos cielos!*" Jimmy made amazed use of Roccos' pet byword. "What if it should be that? And we've just stumbled upon it like a lot of wandering goofies!" His tone expressed positive awe of such an astounding possibility.

"I believe we have, though!" Ralph's voice had risen in happy excitement. Next second his face fell. "Oh, what's the use of getting excited? We're on one side of a rock pile and

it's on the other. We couldn't get to it if we tried for a month."

"Let's give it the twice-over. Maybe we can find some way to get at it from the outside," Jimmy said hopefully.

"See here," began Bret energetically, "there's a curve in the passage between the other cave and this one. You recall that. Well, I believe these two caves are almost on a line. The passage is really curved like a new moon only we can't see it so. If the caves are in line then this one must face on the arroyo, too—— Oh, shucks!" burst from his lips in sharp vexation.

"I get you." Ralph laughed, a rueful note in his laughter. "There's certainly no water running in that arroyo. If there were, it wouldn't be an arroyo."

"That's just it," mourned Bret. "Where do you suppose the water is running then?"

"Search me." Ralph shook his head. "Under ground, maybe," he added, his fertile brain having seized upon this theory.

"Then how can we hear it so plainly?" demanded Jimmy. Without waiting for a reply he threw himself down on the uneven rocky floor with his ear to the stones.

"What's stirring?" Ralph asked, impatient of delay, after Jimmy had remained speechless and motionless on the cave floor for three or four minutes.

"I can hear the water more plainly now than when I stood up," Jimmy answered. "Maybe it's underneath here instead of next to it."

"It has to be that, or nothing,I guess," was Ralph's dry rejoinder. "And we're up against the same old snag of how are we going to get at it."

"Rip up the floor," Jimmy made derisive suggestion.

"Yes, take a week off and try to budge just one of those whoppers of rocks," Ralph imitated Jimmy's tone.

"Let's have a look at the floor. There might be a stone trap in it. Don't you remember those old stone traps we saw in the ruined Inca palace near Cuzco?" Bret's light was already playing upon the rough flat rock slabs which comprised the cave floor.

There were two of the big stones, each between three and four feet square that looked as though either might form a trap. The three Adventure Boys went over them patiently, hopeful of discovering a means of operating them. After an hour's steady search they were obliged reluctantly to admit defeat.

"We'd better get the gang on the job," Jimmy advocated. "Green is a wizard at this sort of puzzle. I'd say that this stone here was a trap. Only I can't prove it," he ended with a baffled little laugh.

His light trained on the stone he had desig-

nated as a possible trap, Jimmy stepped over on it and began stamping on the flat surface, first with one foot, then the other. "It doesn't ring hollow," he said. "It isn't——" He broke off with a startled cry as he felt the stone give beneath his stamping feet. The cry changed to a yell as he realized that the stone was continuing to drop, carrying him with it.

He made a wild grab and managed to clutch a side of the yawning gap left by the descending stone. Then he felt strong arms grasping his own and hauling him up and out of danger. Mingled with the alarmed voices of his exclaiming pals he heard more plainly than before the murmuring rush of water.

CHAPTER XVII

IN THE HANDS OF THE CAPAS

"THERE'S only one thing to do that I can see, Green—go down there and find out." Malcolm Edwards rose from his kneeling position on the floor of the little cave which Ralph, Bret and Jimmy had discovered only a short hour before.

The three excited discoverers had raced back to the canyon where the sailor, the jewel man and Pedro Roccos were prospecting along the walls of the canyon for evidences of emerald quarries. Leaving Roccos to watch the ponies and mules, Mr. Edwards and Stanley Green had accompanied the three Adventure Boys to the newly-discovered cave, post haste.

"Let me go." Green had nodded assent to the jewel man's plan.

"We'll both go. I'll go down first," Edwards made intrepid answer. "I'd rather you'd stay up here and lower me on a rope."

"Oh, let me go, Oom Dad; please," begged Ralph.

"Later. You may go for the rope instead," his father requested, smiling. "Bring me the sixty-foot rope."

Ralph grumbled a little, then went for the rope with which Topa had hauled Roccos up from certain death. Seeing the rope reminded him of Topa.

"I wish Chocolate Bud were here now. I feel that we're on the verge of something besides that hole there. Are we going to find the lost cavern of emeralds, or are we going to stir up a whopper of a snake?" Ralph handed Green the coil of rope with a fantastic flourish.

"No big snakes around here. Those six-foot fellows that light up at night are the biggest reptiles going up in this altitude. They belong to the boa family, but they're only little second cousins."

"Much obliged, Green's Natural History for the Young. I'll have you bound in crushed Levant and put in the New York Public Library," grinned Ralph.

"If you feel the rope jerk twice, pull me up instantly," Edwards directed Green. "I'll give it three jerks when I'm ready to come up. One jerk will mean I've struck bottom. If it's not far down I'll call out my orders."

"Right-o. Here you are." Green deftly fastened the rope under Edwards' shoulders. "From up here it looks to me like some drop—twenty-five feet, if not more than that."

The camp light in his hands, Malcolm Edwards swung his legs into the trap opening. Very slowly Green lowered the jewel man down

into the dark void, illuminated, perhaps, for the first time in centuries.

It seemed a long time to the eager watchers clustered about the open trap before they heard Edwards' voice raised in a cheerful hail of: "Hello, up there. I'm not ready to come up for a while. It's all right down here. Nothing to be alarmed over."

They heard no more from the jewel man for at least fifteen minutes. Ralph, growing impatient, stretched himself on a level with the trap and bawled down at his father: "Hi there, my Chief, don't be afraid to speak up and hand us the news. How many emeralds have you found, so far?"

"Coming up before long," the jewel hunter tranquilly assured. Fifteen minutes more, and a glad sigh ascended as Green announced three jerks on the rope.

Green and Jimmy combined forces to draw Mr. Edwards up to the cave floor again. He scrambled over the edge of the open square and sprang to his feet with a triumphant: "Ralph, you asked me how many emeralds I have found, since I disappeared into that trap. Not any yet, but I know they're there. What I'm almost sure of is—I've found the lost cavern of emeralds."

A riot of joyful shouts went up at the bewilderingly good news. The four Adventure

Boys caught hands and performed a wildly exuberant dance about their chief.

"What's down there?" was Green's first question after the shouting.

"The real bottom of the canyon, with a swift rushing brook running through it. I should judge it was about thirty feet from the trap to the bottom. I landed in another cave directly under this. This floor forms the roof. It's a lofty kind of cave and opens into the canyon. There's not much vegetation down there now, but if ever I saw emerald quarries, they're in that canyon." A pleased gleam brightened the jewel man's steady gray eyes as he spoke.

"Then it must have been true—about the fellows before the Incas' time who put that false bottom in the canyon and cached their emerald patch," Jimmy said wonderingly. "Roccos will dance a jig when he hears that he had the right dope about the famous *caverne*. The old Inca evidently knew what he was talking about."

"How are we going to hunt emeralds down there in the dark?" Bret demanded with sudden blankness as the dismaying question popped into his brain.

"I've already been thinking about that," replied the jewel man. "The first thing we'll do is dig down in the arroyo at a point directly over the cavern itself. The only way to discover the depth of the coating of gravel is to

dig down to the false bottom these ancients built in the canyon. It's made of rock, I should judge from the glimpses I got of it while down below. The gravel coating may not be more than four or five feet deep. In such case it would be easy to handle. But the rock bottom —that's different. If we can manage to break through it we can put in two or three good-sized square openings that will let in considerable light. We can camouflage them from the outside."

"Great head, Oom Dad." Ralph lightly tapped his father on the top of the head with one finger. "We can keep the two camp lanterns burning down there, too, for quite a while if we cut out cooking on the oil stove and go back to wood cook fires again. That would help some. Besides, I do most of the hash cooking. If I'm willing to rule out the oilburner for a while you fellows have no kick coming."

"What's one dinky oilburner beside acres of emeralds?" Bret said airily.

"Not on the map," Green agreed with light humor. "You're a good little scout, Bossy Ralph."

"When are we going to commence the job?" Ralph ignored the compliment, though it pleased him immensely.

"At once," was his father's concise reply. "Let us go out to the canyon now. We must see Roccos. I'll tell you my plan out there."

As the five prospectors passed over the threshold of the open doorway in the side of the canyon, Malcolm Edwards said with a backward nod: "We've been leaving that place open. It must be closed from now on."

Pedro Roccos's delight at the jewel man's unexpected revelation burst bounds. He laughed and pranced about at a funny, joyful skip, singing in Spanish at top voice. Presently he had calmed, and was giving his absorbed attention to Edwards' plan.

"While we are trying to break through the false bottom of the canyon we must not be bothered with having to watch the ponies and mules," Edwards told his flock. "We're not sure we will not be attacked by Capas. They may trail us here yet. The animals must be driven into the cave and the secret door shut. We can take the cave at the back of the passage for our own use and leave the other to the animals. I noticed the air seemed fairly pure in the back cave. No doubt there are a number of crevices between rocks that let in enough air. I'd rather sleep out in the open, naturally, but we're going to take Topa's parting advice to guard ourselves."

Malcolm Edwards' first step toward accomplishing the task before him was to make several trips up and down the passage between the two caves so as to fix, as nearly as he could, the exact location of these in his mind. He sur-

mised that the brook on the true canyon bottom was fed by a large subterranean spring. He also believed that it began underneath the high rocky formation which marked the upper end of the little canyon. He decided that, later, he would try to find the place where the cached brook either continued or ended. The mountain was full of little brooks, few of them flowing free for more than a few hundred rods.

Once he had the location of the passage and caves fixed in his mind he was ready to try to find the point in the arroyo which was directly over the subterranean cavern.

"We're taking a big chance of digging for a week and not making any headway," he confided to his willing helpers. "We'll have to dig straight down till we hit the rock, even if it's twenty feet down to it. Only, I believe it will be worth our trouble."

It was early afternoon before Malcolm Edwards came to a final careful decision regarding the place in the arroyo to be tackled. By then the outfit was hungry and clamoring loudly for lunch. Lunch eaten, the prospectors followed the jewel man to the chosen spot in the arroyo, laden with digging implements. Then began a season of strenuous work for the adventurers.

Their eager hope of quickly striking the rocky false bottom of the canyon was their strongest impetus to energetic work. Shortly

before five o'clock that afternoon Ralph's shovel struck rock at nearly six feet below the surface of the arroyo. Ralph had been standing in a dirt pocket industriously plying his shovel when the shovel clanged against rock. Directly afterward he shouted with triumphant surprise as his shovel struck a big lump of soil which suddenly receded from it, falling through an opening of about a foot square between two pieces of rock.

"Here's all the proof you need!" he exulted, as the dirt continued to sift down through the exposed opening into dark depths. "Listen."

Silence descended upon the little group of men in pleasant obedience to Ralph's command. Then a sound fell upon their ears which brought a smile to every face. It was the murmur of water rushing over stones. It came up plainly to them from the dark depths below.

Engrossed by their discovery, the adventurers failed to see a black-caped figure peering up at them from the lower end of the arroyo. The black apparition remained watching them from behind a giant pine for at least five minutes. Then it gradually withdrew from the arroyo, dodging behind one tree, then another, until it finally disappeared, unseen, unheard.

The adventurers left off work just before sunset in order to cook supper and have it out of the way before dark. The ponies and mules had been driven into the cave and led down the dark

passage to the inner cave before the jewel hunters had begun their work that afternoon. After supper the adventurers had determined to close their "front" door and spend the evening until they were ready to turn in, in exploring the subterranean cavern which they hoped was actually the cavern of emeralds. Mr. Edwards, Roccos and Jimmy were to go down together. When they were hauled up to the cave floor again, Bret, Ralph and Green were to descend into the cavern in their places.

"I'll go for water and fix the cornbeef hash for supper, and that's my limit to-night," Ralph announced as he picked up the camp water pails for a trip to the spring. "It's up to the rest of you to get busy."

Immediately a storm of joking remonstrance broke upon the air, at which Ralph merely grinned. "Actions speak louder than words, you know. Never mind telling me what you're going to do toward getting supper. Just go ahead, and do it. Water carrier and hash artist are my speed." He swung off down the canyon rattling the pails mischievously together as he went.

Arrived at the spring, which gushed from a height of four or five feet into a good-sized water hole, Ralph bent forward, setting the pails well under the flow. Was it a trick of the sun, still in evidence, or had a blowing tree limb cast a sudden shadow across the pool-like water

hole? Ralph raised his head in time to see a fold of something black drop before his eyes. Before he could more than gasp, more folds of thick unyielding cloth had wrapped themselves about his head, shoulders and arms. They were tightening painfully now. He tried to shout, but the thickness of the cloth muffled his voice. He kicked out vigorously and found himself jerked off his feet. Next second a rope was being wound round and round them. Then he heard a voice, harsh, rasping, terrible, say: "Carry him away from here. Dare to let him escape. This is the one I wanted."

CHAPTER XVIII

IN THE HAUNTS OF THE SHADOW GOD

"OH, mamma, what a mess," groaned Ralph under his breath as he felt himself being picked up by the feet and head and rapidly carried away from his own camp. On and on, upward, too, Ralph could tell by the way he was being jolted, his captors silently bore him.

Half an hour's steady travel and he became aware that his captors had come to an abrupt stop on the ragged up-trail. He heard a rumble of men's voices speaking in angry Spanish, then again came the harsh, terrible voice. Ralph loathed the sound of that voice as greatly as he would have hated the sight of a venomous snake. Followed a peremptory command, spoken in Quichua, and which Ralph could not understand. Then he was dumped down on the hard ground. Next the rope wrapped around his legs was removed. He heaved an involuntary sigh of relief as the binding rope dropped away.

"Stand, you." The harsh voice was now addressing him. In the same instant he was vio-

lently jerked to his feet by some one from behind him.

"Take this choker away from my head, you big goof. Who's afraid of you?" Ralph raged, struggling to loosen the heavy cloth folds that tightly wrapped the upper part of his body.

"You are not afraid to die?" taunted the voice. "*Bueno.* Soon you will show me that you are not afraid. Now I have use for you. Only because of that, you still live. You are too heavy to carry. Walk you. Try to escape. I will have you lashed to death, and laugh at your suffering."

"Oh, *callese* (shut up)," Ralph came back crossly. In spite of the seriousness of his predicament, he was furiously angry with himself for having been caught off his guard at the spring. Long since, the gang must have missed him. Ralph knew what a hub-bub his sudden disappearance from camp would create. He was confident his father would institute a search for him that very night on foot, probably ascending the mountain by the trail which they had used in descending.

Ralph was equally confident that he was in the hands of the Capas; moreover, in the hands of "the one," according to Topa's note, "who seeks your life." There was but one thing to do. He vowed within himself that he would do it. He must somehow manage to make his escape under cover of the night. He resolved

to attempt a swift dash for liberty the moment the smothering folds of cloth had been removed from about his head and shoulders.

Gathering hope from his resolution to escape, Ralph submitted unresistingly to having a rope knotted about his waist. His legs still ached from the recent pressure of the rope, and he knew he could not "put up a kick" that would result in anything but failure to score. He listened, expecting to hear the harsh voice again. Instead he received a forceful punch between the shoulders and a deep surly voice ordered: "*Arre,* Americano; *arre!*"

"Take your hands off me, you Peruvian pig! Don't you dare '*arre*' me," Ralph blazed out angrily at his captors. "You're not talking to your own kind. You're talking to a man. Get me straight on that." Ralph had flashingly resented the rough command of "*Arre!*" a Spanish term applied only to beasts of burden.

"*Callese!*" the voice Ralph hated now broke in again, thick with anger. It articulated in Spanish sounds which Ralph could not translate into words, vibrant with malignant displeasure. "Take the cloth off him and beat him if he speaks thus again," it next directed in Spanish. Then came silence.

"You hear, Americano? Speak no more." A new voice, deep and inclined to pleasantness, offered this counsel. Something in the unknown speaker's tone challenged Ralph's at-

tention. Where before had he heard that voice? It gave him something new to consider as he tramped along at a jerking gait at about six or seven feet behind the bandit who had hold of the tie-rope which secured him. Once again he heard the strangely haunting voice call out behind him in reply to a question asked by the bandit who was engaged in leading Ralph. Second sound of the voice and recollection swept Ralph's retentive brain. The voice was like Topa's. Suppose the owner of that voice were Topa? Ralph's heart almost skipped a beat.

All that Topa had ever said about the Capas returned to Ralph's memory. At the inn, before starting for the mountains, the outfit had suspected Topa of knowing more of the Capas than he seemed to know. Why Topa should have formed one of a gang of bandits who had deliberately set out to capture him, Ralph could not guess. Why should Topa have given the adventurers the golden condor pins as a spell against the Capas if a Capa himself? Ralph hastily decided the voice was not Topa's.

When again he saw the light, it was not the light of day. After an all-night tramp up the mountain he was jerked up a last steep bit of trail, then down a flight of seven or eight uneven stone steps and brought to a halt on a level floor of rock. Of a sudden he felt deft hands busying themselves with the smothering

cloth wrapping. As it became loosened to the point of a final pulling-off he heard a muttered, "*Cuidado,*" in his ear. It was followed by a further, "Trust me. You shall escape this night," in Spanish.

Ralph's eager eyes, blinking a little at the dazzling glare of a row of acetylene bracket lamps, darted from one point to another of the spacious room in which he stood. It was a high-roofed cavern but its rocky sides were hung with rare Persian rugs and ancient tapestries. Rugs, large and small, of equal beauty and value carpeted the smooth stone floor. At one end of the room was a dais of gold with a row of emeralds the size of filberts set across the top of the high back. Other evidences of lavish wealth were scattered about the great room, exquisite statues and statuettes, in gold, silver and tinted marbles; there were curios which Ralph knew at a glance to be the priceless treasures of many lands. There was a crystal, larger than any he had ever seen in Japan, poised upon a gold standard, and a jade figure of a diver that brought a breath of admiration from him.

Except for the dais there were no evidences of chairs in the room, although several gorgeous cushions were scattered along the left side of the cave. Amazed at his surroundings, Ralph's first glance had been toward seeing the man with the voice like Topa's. The

friendly bandit, having warned him, had stepped behind him. Ralph whirled about and found himself staring into the dark faces of a pair of bandits. He was not surprised to find that both were Indian. He forced back an astonished gasp at sight of one. The man closely resembled Topa, save that his face was thinner, and he looked to be considerably older. The other man Ralph thought had the most unprepossessing face he had ever seen. It was broad and swarthy with a wide, misshapen nose and a slash for a mouth. His eyes, small and black, bent themselves evilly upon Ralph.

"Go forward, Americano," ordered the tall bandit, who resembled Topa. "Stop you, when I speak."

Ralph directed a deliberate, searching glance at the Inca, then turned and walked unhesitatingly forward. He had decided to obey the secret friend's instruction. As he went toward the dais he saw a pair of heavy velvet portières, which hung directly behind it, move a little.

"Stop," came the command.

Ralph halted with military precision. Next instant he was understanding why he had loathed first sound of the harsh, terrible voice he had heard. From between the curtains had stepped a mannikin; a creature not more than four feet tall with a squat, gnarled body and a huge repulsive head. He had thought the one bandit of the pair of guards unprepossessing.

He was now seeing a face infinitely more hideous both of feature and expression. From a low receding forehead trails of coarse, black hair straggled down almost into a pair of small snaky eyes. The cruel set of the thin-lipped mouth and the long chin thrust menacingly forward lent to the evil face of the dwarf the semblance of a venomous snake about to strike. Ralph was forcibly reminded of a bushmeister he had killed not long before near the spring.

"Down, you!" The hideous dwarf had come forward to the dais, hand raised in scowling command.

"Down, nothing, you ugly little freak. Who told you you were a king?" Ralph flashed back with contemptuous scorn. The dwarf had on each occasion spoken Spanish to him. He now replied in Spanish.

"I am Dozo." The dwarf made an angry rush at Ralph. Something sharp and bright glittered in his right hand. He brought himself to an abrupt halt within six inches of the motionless Adventure Boy. Ralph had held himself absolutely still, jaws grimly set. Another instant and he intended to make a quick snatch at the hand that held the knife, twisting the weapon from the dwarf's grasp.

Dozo had been quick enough to see that Ralph had guessed his rush to be a bluff. "Why should I soil my hands with *you?*" he snarled, showing fang-like discolored teeth. "You are

for the Pool. Ah, I see you know what I mean?"

Ralph had cast an involuntary glance at him at the word "Pool."

"You and your prying Americano *companeros* would seek to find the treasures of the mountain, stealing them from me. I am the owner of all," he waved his arms, the gold embroidered robe he wore falling away from a pair of hairy knotted arms.

"You'll have to show us a clear title," Ralph was grimly humorous.

"No, I will show you nothing. It is you who must show me. Why have you dug the great hole in the canyon where your camp is? Reboza has seen this and come quickly to tell me. He was smart enough to catch you."

"*Si,*" interposed the swarthy-faced bandit eagerly. "I saw this hole. I lay down in the thicket till this young fool went to the spring, and then caught him. I am Reboza."

"This one is no fool, Reboza. You talk too much," snapped the dwarf. "*Callese.* Where were you, that you helped Reboza not to catch this one, Yupani?"

"I was far from Reboza, and about my own business," Yupani answered shortly.

"*Ay, si.*" The dwarf nodded as though having just recalled something. "Remember, if you should find that traitor, Paullo, he is to be

held for me." He cast a sudden spiteful glance at the man, Yupani.

"He who has not been a Capa can not be a traitor to the Capas," was Yupani's stern retort. "Never through my hands shall he be given to you, a prisoner. You know this. I would kill you before I would let you thrust *him* into the Pool."

"*Callese.* You are *loco.*" Instead of flying into a rage at Yupani's defiance Dozo seemed anxious to dismiss the subject. He turned malignant eyes upon Ralph with: "Where have you hidden your horses and mules? There is a secret of the canyon that I could never find. It is an old secret and relates to the *caverne de las esmeraldas.* Have you found this *caverne?* I believe you have. Tell me where it is and I will let you die easily by the Pool. If you refuse to tell me you shall die by inches. I will give you a little while to think about this. Since you answer nothing to my questions," he added morosely. His small stock of patience was evidently waning.

"Take him away, Yupani, to the little cave. Bring him here again in an hour. Guard him well." With a last deep scowl at Ralph who had stood woodenly silent through Dozo's harangue, the dwarf bandit king climbed the two gold steps of his dais and sat down upon it, looking like a hideous brown idol. "Stay you here, Reboza. I would question you."

An ill-favored grin lighted Reboza's face at this evident bit of favoritism extended to him. Yupani had taken Ralph lightly by an arm and steered him to the cave door behind still another portière.

"*Santos cielos,*" Yupani breathed softly as the two men went down the rough steps. "What good fortune for us thus to get rid of Reboza. Come, *companero,* we must go fast from here. Before long will come more Capas who are to return from raiding a plantacion. Just now only Reboza and Dozo are here besides ourselves."

"Let's go back and tie 'em both up and clean house," Ralph suggested intrepidly. "We can do it."

"No, no. We must go," Yupani persisted. "I will tell you this, because he is your *amigo* and has loved your merry heart. Topa is my brother. Long ago he wished me to let him send the secret police to capture the Capas. But there was a reason why I hated to do it. I was a Capa, though I had never robbed nor hurt any one. Topa comes here to-night with the police. I am to meet him at a certain place and time on the mountain. We must hurry to reach there."

Yupani had stopped only long enough to pour this information into Ralph's amazed ears. "Hurry," he urged, as though moved by an alarming thought. "We must pass the Pool.

Keep far from its edge as you pass." He glanced nervously about him as he spoke. "When you see me begin to run, you must run, too. Follow me as closely as you can."

They had broken into a light-footed run now, racing along through an open thicket, then down a steep slope, green with bushy saplings. It led them to the bottom of a little canyon with smooth rockbound sides. Ralph gave an audible gasp. Almost at his feet lay a nearly circular sheet of black water. It was not more than twelve or fifteen feet in circumference and was hedged at the upper end by a curious barrier of broken rock.

Yupani was already running like a deer along the left-hand rocky side of the little canyon. Ralph essayed to follow at the Inca's heels. Of a sudden he saw a shadow fall across the surface of the pool. A cold forceful blast of wind struck him, propelling him before it. He gasped, and tried to battle against it. He could feel himself being forced to the edge of the Pool. Then something gave his arm a terrifically violent jerk. He heard a shout from Yupani. Came a grating snarl of rage. The snarl changed immediately afterward to a frantic howl of pain. Shriek upon shriek followed that first wolf-like howl. Then the wild cries ceased.

Standing beside Yupani who was still holding him by the arm he had forcefully jerked,

he heard the Inca say in a tone of awe: "So, Dozo, you murder thing, you died by the justice *de Dios*. I am glad of this. He was cunning. He suspected me, and followed us."

"What is it, Yupani? What happened?" Ralph stood staring in bewilderment at the seemingly blank canyon wall. "Was that Dozo who yelled?"

"*Si*. You were nearly blown into the Pool. I have always believed Dozo was the Shadow god. Now I know it. He was caught in his own trap." Yupani ran over to the point on the canyon wall from which Ralph had felt the strong wind blowing. "See," he cried triumphantly. "Here is the proof." Hurrying to him, Ralph recognized the piece of gold embroidered velvet in Yupani's hand as a bit of the dwarf's robe.

"He is behind this." Yupani touched the wall with a light finger. "I pulled this from out of the rock. Here is the stone door of which he knew the secret mechanism. He must always have sat here with the door open and sent the wind to blow men into the Pool with a very large pair of bellows. When one had gone he pressed the spring and closed the rock door. This time he must have touched the spring too soon. The force of the sliding door must have been great. He will stay walled-in forever. Now the curse has been lifted from this mountain."

"Who was he, Yupani?" Ralph asked in a dazed tone. Things had happened to him in such rapid succession since his kidnaping that he had practically run out of words expressive of his feeling.

"He was Dozo, an evil thing. He was very old, perhaps one hundred and fifty years. He ruled the Capas. They liked his evil ways. But they feared him, also."

"Great Scott! *One hundred and fifty!* And he was the Shadow god of the Pool! My father said he believed there was some such fiend back of it."

"This was also my belief, but I could not prove Dozo to be that one. Both Topa and I had seen the shadow. Dozo must have cast the shadow first to attract the attention of the one he wished to kill, to the Pool. Then, in an instant, came the hard blast of wind that he made with the bellows to blow men into the black water. The rock closed so quickly that he was not seen."

"You've said it," Ralph commended. "There's nothing the matter with your head."

"Except there is a price on it," Yupani laughed shortly. "I am no longer a Capa. Americano, when I was not much older than you, I grew angry with my father. I, and the only son of Villac Remaca, our neighbor, ran away from home like two young fools and joined the Capas. Poor Villac Remaca went to

the Capas himself, alone on the mountain, and paid them a fortune to get back his son. The Capas sold him back to his father, for they did not fancy him. They swore to kill him, if ever he spoke of them to any one. Many believed that Villac Remaca was a Capa because he was seen with Capas, and this was a sorrow to him. My father disowned me, but in his old age he was sorry for that. I would soon have run away from the Capas. I soon grew disgusted with them, and horrified because they killed for gold. But Dozo would not let me go, and I grew afraid to try to escape after I saw how Dozo treated his men. I stayed on the mountain awhile, then Marco Perez, an old Capa, took me to Buenos Ayres. We lived there like father and son for ten years. Then he went back to the mountain and took me with him. So I learned my father had died and my younger brother was a man.

"When I came back I had no wish to be a Capa. Perez and I had lived quietly on money of his own, left him by his father. He was sorry to be a Capa, but he had taken the death oath years before and had to remain one. He would not have gone back to the mountain, but Dozo sent for us. Dozo never let any one escape him. Then I met Topa, my brother, who came to the mountains to hunt for me. And now we are free, and Dozo is dead. And Perez is dead, too. Long ago, of the heart trouble.

He was the only Capa who was not a Capa, but a man like myself who had done a foolish act, and must then, pay all his life for it."

"Oh, jumping Jupiter, what a story!" Ralph exclaimed as the Inca ended the engrossing story of his connection with the black-cloaked bandits of the Andes Mountains. "You're a lucky man, Yupani Topa, and you are going to find it out, *pronto*. You've surely been a friend to me. I'd be in that Pool now, but for your help. When the gang gets together again around our good old campfire, we think we'll have something pretty nice to tell you and your brother, Paullo Topa."

CHAPTER XIX

IN THE HEART OF THE HIGH MOUNTAIN

"IT'S the greatest disappointment I've ever met with." Malcolm Edwards dropped into a weary heap beside the square opening of the trap under which lay the reputed cavern of emeralds.

"It's a blame shame, after all, the hard work we've done," Bret grumbled. "Not a single green shiner to show except the ones Topa gave us. We didn't find the cavern of emeralds at all. What we found was simply some sort of Inca contraption. The confounded Inkys had some kind of loco bug that made them hustle a cover over their little brooklet."

"I think we are not off on the cavern of emeralds idea," Green differed positively. "The walls of the canyon look like the kind of quarry that emeralds come from. I have a dark hunch that the fellows who owned this emerald combine cleaned up the patch," he finished, laughing.

"I believe you have the thing straight, Green." Mr. Edwards nodded thoughtfully. "The sides of the canyon look to me to have

been stripped. I hate to give up here now. We've spent so much time getting the prospect into trim."

"Let's give it another week's trial," Ralph coaxed. "We've simply got to dig out some greenies. I'd hate to go back to the inn and tell Tomas Vesano he was right-o."

Over two weeks had passed since the eventful morning when Ralph had been saved from the cold black waters of the Pool, by Yupani Topa. He and the Inca had soon left behind them the wild region where Dozo the hideous dwarf had ruled the Capas. They had traveled steadily all day, stopping only long enough to eat some cold partridge meat which Yupani had provided.

To Ralph's unbounded joy he had met the outfit, armed and out searching for him at a distance of not more than a mile from camp. A general wayside rejoicing had occurred and Yupani had been hailed as a hero after Ralph's exciting story of events had been poured into his comrades' ears.

The adventurers had been keen on taking Yupani to their canyon camp with them. He, however, had been anxiously impatient to return to the Capa stronghold and fight by his brother's side, if needed. He had arrived on the scene of the Capas' last stand at least an hour after that stand had been made, and the black-cloaked bandits on their way down the

mountain under police guard. Not more than twenty had arrived from the plantation raid. These, with Reboza, had been captured, with no casualties. With the prisoners marshaled down the mountain to Cuzco, the mountain had been placed under special surveillance to remain thus until not an outlaw remained in the lofty stronghold of the Capas. Dozo had been the power which had kept the Capas actively murderous.

Yupani had gone to Cuzco with Topa to give evidence against the Capas and plead his own cause for freedom. He and Topa were determined that he must be pardoned by the Peruvian government for his connection with the Capas before he should feel free to mingle again with his countrymen. The adventurers were waiting hopefully for the return of the brothers, who had promised to join the outfit again on the mountain as soon as they could.

"Topa and Yupani ought to be breezing in here before long," Jimmy said. "Maybe they can steer us to a real emerald prospect."

"Topa may have one up his sleeve, but not Yupani," Ralph shook his head. "He doesn't believe in the cavern of emeralds. He was surprised to hear that Topa believed in it."

"Dozo must have believed it was on this mountain," Green pointed out, "or he wouldn't have tried to pick you about it. He was old

enough to have had real information about the cavern."

"I've had more hearsay, and less authentic information about this emerald cavern than any other jewel prospect I was ever out on!" Malcolm Edwards exclaimed in sudden exasperation.

"Oh, cheer up. It's going to get worse," was Bret's derisively comforting remark. "Let's go hunting this afternoon and have bear steak for supper."

Bret's advice was hailed with acclamation and promptly acted upon. Trouble with the Capas, the work on the disappointing emerald prospect and Ralph's untimely disappearance from camp had shoved the zest for hunting in the background. Cinnamon bears were not infrequently seen in that region. Several times the adventurers had planned a hunting trip, to be indulged in when the lost cavern of emeralds should have been found.

When at twilight that evening the adventurers returned to their canyon they brought the carcass of a cinnamon bear with them. While they did not have bear steak for supper, they had it for breakfast the next morning. Green and Roccos were first men out of their blankets the next morning. They rigged up a skinning rack and spring pole from saplings and skillfully went at the task of removing the

heavy pelt and cutting up the carcass of the bear.

Just one day away from their pet hope had made the baffled jewel hunters eager to go back to their underground cavern again. In this instance they had not divided the cavern into individual claims. Time enough for that when a strike should be made. Just then the united ambition of the hunters was to "stir up an emerald." With one "greenie" for a beginning, and actually found in the cavern, there was surely hope.

The jewel hunters had made five square openings in the false bottom of the canyon. Due to them, the cavern was now fairly well-lighted in daytime. In working at close quarters with the hard clay, of which the sides of the cavern were composed, the workers had to bring the light of the oil lanterns or else that of their flashlights to bear directly upon the clay which they were engaged in uncovering. In the shallow brook, after deflection, and much patient digging, they had discovered nothing that remotely resembled an emerald.

"This is the day when we make our fortunes and uncover a whale of an emerald patch," Ralph predicted gayly as one after another, the prospectors went down the rope ladder which Stanley Green had handily constructed from part of the camp ropes.

"Remember; to-night, you said it," Jimmy

told him without enthusiasm. "We'll need something to laugh at then. This work all the time, and no greenies, is a sad, weary life."

"Oh, Cheesecake! It has lugging bundles on the New York docks beaten a mile, anyway," Bret said with laughing good humor.

"Yes, *you bet it has.* I'm going to take a brace. No more growling. I don't know any other place I'd rather be than here," Jimmy hastily amended.

The prospectors had now reached the brookside and stood grouped together for a moment awaiting Mr. Edwards' opinion regarding the day's prospecting. Presently they scattered, each picking a section on one side of the brook, or the other.

Ralph chose a point of beginning upon which the light from one of the square openings fell. As he industriously dug, tapped, hammered and scraped at the hard unyielding clay in which he hoped to find emeralds, he continued to wish for a rich strike. Coming at last to a huge flat square of stone, set deeply in the hard clay of the cavern's walls, Ralph looked up at it with considerable curiosity. His mind was still keen upon secret openings in canyon walls. He wondered if the stone were as solid as it seemed. Or, had some unknown genius of the past hollowed out solid rock and devised a cunning spring by which to operate a secret door?

He paused in his work to stare fascinatedly

at the block of stone. It was considerably above the level of his eyes. As he gazed at it he thought he saw it move. No, it was not the stone that had moved. It was that bit of outjutting rock below it that was shaking. Now it was the ground under his feet. It was rocking. Ralph heard a long low rumble. He shouted in alarm, sprang away from the near neighborhood of the big stone and ran toward where Green was standing. As he ran the rumble ended in a loud detonating crash.

"Run for the rope!" Ralph obeyed Green's command, shouting over one shoulder. By the time he had reached the rope ladder his comrades were there, also. One after another, they went up the makeshift ladder as nimbly as monkeys.

"Was it a 'quake?" was Jimmy's first excited query of Malcolm Edwards as the party of relieved hunters found the cave floor under their feet again.

"No; only a mild disturbance; quite common to this region. It was the disturbance that loosened that large rock and ripped it out of the canyon side. We'll wait until after lunch. If there are no more such quakes we will go down below again. I've had good luck this morning." He took an emerald of possibly ten carats, uncut, and exhibited it with smiling pride to the others.

"For the love of Pete!" was Ralph's open-

ing salutation as he returned to the place in the canyon wall which had held the big stone. The stone lay in the middle of the brook now. It was not nearly as thick as Ralph had estimated it to be. There was a deep recess, stone-lined, in the cavern side which the huge stone had undoubtedly sealed. In the recess stood a small stone coffer, about two feet long, by a foot wide, and a foot deep.

His heart pounding almost loud enough to be heard, Ralph climbed up the ragged trail which the falling rock had cut into the cavern side. It required strong arms to lift the little coffer. He took firm hold of it, then turned and made a quick downward slide with it. Essaying to open the coffer he found it sealed.

"Oh, shucks!" he voiced loudly in his disappointment.

"What's stirring?" Green yelled at him.

"Pass the word to the gang to come here. Come running yourself," was Ralph's mysterious request.

"*Mi madre!*" exclaimed Roccos when he saw the coffer. "This is *muy viejo* (very old). I have seen one like this in the museum at Bolivia. They say the one I saw was over one thousand years old. So it is older than any Incas that ever lived."

"It's sealed," Ralph told the group disappointedly.

"Here is the sharp knife." Roccos produced

a thin-bladed, very sharp knife from a pocket. Skillfully he inserted it between the overhanging lid and an edge of the box. The long-dried cement crumbled under the knife. A little more cutting and scraping and the lid broke free.

"It is yours. You open, Señor Ralph." The polite little man from Chile motioned to Ralph.

"Oh, go ahead," Ralph urged genially.

A final tug, and the lid rose with a jerk. A unanimous cry of wonder broke from the circle of men around the box. The coffer was divided into two compartments, one of them twice as large as the other. In the smaller compartment, lay a rope of emeralds, strung on a platinum chain. The other compartment was filled to the brim with emeralds. They were not the uncut, unpolished gem. These emeralds were cut and polished to the highest degree of beauty. They were sizable stones, none of them weighing less than two carats, many weighing forty, fifty carats or more.

Ralph snatched the necklace from its long hiding place with a wondering gurgle. Straightened and thrown over his head it hung down to his waist. It had a pendant, a single emerald of not less than a hundred and fifty carats. Nor were the other graduated stones of the necklace less than twenty carats each. It was as though the most perfect emeralds which the earth had yielded man had been brought together in the necklace.

"How many do you suppose are there?" Jimmy asked tremulously, indicating the full coffer of gems with a slightly shaking finger.

"Hundreds of 'em. Do you wonder there are no more greenies in the cavern? Those energetic old jewel hounds cleaned up this prospect. Then they put the coffer in the recess and sealed up the place. Men died quick and violent deaths in those dark ages. Maybe the emerald hounds were all bumped off in one way, or another, and never got back to cart off the *esmeraldas*. You certainly told your own fortune this morning, Boy." Green reached out his hand to Ralph.

"You'd better say the gang's fortune," Ralph corrected, wringing Green's hand. "This is going to be a divvy-up, fair deal. There are six of us here. Topa is seven. Yupani is eight. We'll divide the loose stones into eight parts, and divide the price the necklace will bring in eighths. That won't be less than five hundred thousand. Maybe a cool million dollars."

Nor would any amount of expostulation from his pals change Ralph's views, reinforced by his father's similar opinion. After such an overwhelming piece of good fortune the outfit decided that they had had enough of prospecting for the day—perhaps for good so far as the further seeking of emeralds went. They had without doubt, stumbled upon the glittering re-

sults of the patient toil of a prehistoric band of jewel men. There were emeralds enough in the one compartment to enrich each of the eight men.

While the adventurers were busy with their new possession the ground began a sudden shaking again. It sent them scurrying to the rope ladder, Ralph bringing up the rear with the precious coffer. He called to Green to let down an extra rope for it and after having seen it up to the cave level he scurried up the ladder.

"What do you say to starting back to the valley to-morrow?" Mr. Edwards asked at supper that evening. "We have less than a month left of the time limit we set for ourselves here. We have the emeralds. That is what we came for. I suggest that when the division of the stones has been made, each of us should turn over five per cent of his share to the Peruvian government."

"Good for you, Oom Boss Dad," Ralph set up a lively rah, rah-ing in honor of his father.

In the midst of it two riders came into abrupt sight at the foot of the canyon. They reined in, shouting to the adventurers.

"Oh, you Inky Inca!" Ralph raised an exuberant hail at sight of the pair of brown men, distinguished of feature and showing their Inca blood in their proud bearing. He raced down the canyon to meet them with the jubilant greeting: "Howdy, *companeros;* howdy. You surely

had us up nights about you, Inca man. You didn't know, did you, that when you faded out, you were the only guy on the map who had the front door key to the cavern of emeralds."

CHAPTER XX

ALL IN A NIGHT

"WE have come for you, my Chief. My brother has a reason for wishing you to come away from this mountain soon," Topa said soberly to Malcolm Edwards soon after the rush of welcoming the brothers had subsided. "He will tell you of it."

"It is this, Señor Edu-ardes," Yupani began eagerly. "Among the Capas was a man who knew the signs of Nature. He was very angry with Dozo a while before Dozo was crushed in his own trap and said soon would come the earthquake. Then the high mountain should then be only half as high. So Dozo had him stood on the edge of the Pool and sent him to his death. Now this old one was always right when he told of storms to come. Once he told of the earthquake on a mountain far away, from his own. And in the time he said, the earthquake came to that mountain. I believe the earthquake will come. You had best leave here, and never mind the *esmeraldas*. Life is the greatest *esmeralda* of all."

"We are ready to go, Yupani. First we must

tell you of what has happened. Leave your horses in the canyon with ours. Thanks to you two, our ponies and mules are safe now. We have something wonderful to show you," the jewel man said to the brothers.

Within the shelter of the cave on the canyon, the jewel man told the Inca brothers of the discovery of the ancient cavern of emeralds and of the hard labor of the adventurers to let enough light into it by which to seek for emeralds.

"Dozo was watching you from the time you came to the mountain," Yupani said. "He did not know what you had found, but he suspected you had found something."

"Yes, and I'd have been a gone goose, but for you, Yupani," Ralph cut in. "Only I'd have died game."

"It is better you don't die at all," Roccos sighed thankfully, which raised a laugh.

"I'm glad of it myself," Ralph admitted with his roguish eye-twinkle.

Malcolm Edwards found himself with a "job on his hands," in persuading the Topa brothers that they were fairly entitled to an eighth each of the coffer of emeralds, and also an eighth of the selling price of the emerald necklace. It was only when they discovered that "my Chief" could hold out as long as they in the matter that they agreed to an acceptance of what would mean a large fortune to both. It meant the reclamation of their plantacion which

had yearly decreased in value from their neglect of it since neither had had the means to reclaim it.

Neither Inca could be persuaded to go down the rope ladder for a peep at the cavern of emeralds.

"Let us not tempt the gods," Topa said solemnly to Yupani. "We have suffered enough."

"Es verdad. Tell Señor Edu-ardes to let us pack the mules and get out of here, pronto. I know a short trail to the ridge. The sooner we are off of this mountain the better."

In spite of all speed in preparing for the journey back to the valley, it was nearly noon next day before the riders got under way. Topa insisted upon taking charge of his mules, leaving his horse to Yupani to lead along beside his own mount.

It was a secret satisfaction to every member of the outfit when toward sunset that day they walked their ponies off the ridge and upon the grassy oval where they had received the previous proclamation of hostility from the Capas.

That night Ralph awoke with the deafening crash of thunder in his ears. Next he heard Green's voice, raised in loud tones of wondering excitement. Then Bret's quick intonations broke crisply upon the now dying rumble. That was enough for Ralph. He leaped up from the tent floor and bounced out the door like an in-

quiring rubber ball bent on finding out what was stirring.

"What's doing? Why didn't you fellows wake me? *Some thunder!* No rain yet." He held out his hand for the feel of rain drops.

"There is no rain," Topa answered him. "You did not hear the thunder. You heard the high mountain turn over and fall down. It is the earthquake. Listen."

From the vast black outline of the mountain they had providentially left behind them the adventurers could see what appeared as dense clouds of dust against the night sky. The shape of the snow-crowned mountain top seemed also to have altered curiously. It would take daylight to discover the devastation and chaotic upheavel caused by the earthquake.

Morning, and they saw with a kind of breathless horror old Nature's tempestuous wrecking of her own creations. The upper part of the high mountain was no more. It had been picked up as though by giants' hands and cast down, straight down upon the canyon with the secret door and the cavern of emeralds, blotting them out forever.

Topa's prediction regarding the cavern of emeralds, "No one will ever find them," had now come to pass, though, "the gods had been gracious to the Americanos," according to Topa's way of thinking.

"Don't you ever believe the gods bothered

their confounded old heads about the Americanos, Inky," was Ralph's laughing contradiction. "It's a way Americanos have of hitting it straight for whatever we want. Do we win? Ask me."

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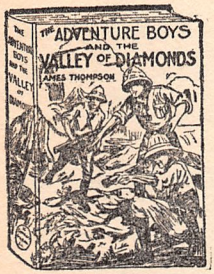

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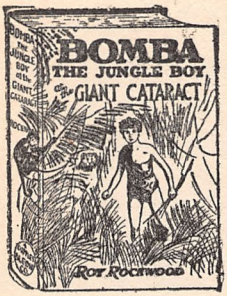

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